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SAT WATCHING, WITH EAGLE EYES BUFFALO BILL AS HE CONFRONTED THE LEADER
OF THE DESPERADOES.

OR,
Silk Lasso Sam,
The Outlaw of the Overland.

A Story of Wild West Heroes and Heroism.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.
TWO OLD FOOLS.

THEY were two old soldiers, both nearing three score years and ten, both on the retired list, and they had been devoted friends since boyhood.

They had been retired from the army after long and faithful service, the one with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, the other wearing a major's rank upon his shoulder-straps.

Both were men of wealth, and widowers, and lived in their luxurious homes, the one North, the other South, but each year they were wont to make a visit to each other in the Christmas time.

The colonel had had a daughter who had mar-

ried against his will, but when she lay upon her death-bed and sent for him he had gone at once and had forgiven her, promising to care for her little boy, for the husband and father had been lost at sea and had left his wife destitute.

The colonel had taken the boy to his home, secured a teacher for him, had bought him a pony and a gun and told his tutor to prepare his son to enter the United States Military Academy.

The tutor had obeyed his instructions to the letter, but had been told by the colonel to travel in foreign lands with the boy for several years and have him ready to become a cadet upon his return.

This was done, and the youth passed his examinations, mental and physical, and promised to do his grandfather honor some day.

The major had also had one child, a daughter, who had married against his will.

She had been deserted by her husband one day in a most mysterious manner, when their child, a little girl, was but a year old.

Her father heard of her misfortune and sent for her to come home with her child, which she did.

Some years after she had died of a broken heart, for she had never rallied from the grief of the cruel desertion of her husband.

The major thus became the sole guardian of the little girl and lavished upon her all that heart could wish for.

Years after the two old cronies sat together in the elegant home of the colonel.

It was Christmas eve, and the two were living over the past as was their wont at their yearly meetings.

Suddenly the colonel said abruptly:

"Major!"

"Yes, colonel."

"Your daughter and mine both married without our consent."

"They did, colonel."

"I have my daughter's son under my guardianship, and you have your granddaughter th you."

"Yes, colonel; it is true."

"The boy is a handsome fellow in his eighteenth year, and is going to make a splendid man."

"From all you say of him, colonel, I believe that he will."

"You have told me that your granddaughter is now thirteen and is going to make a beautiful woman."

"She will, colonel, she will."

"Now, why should these two not marry, major?"

"They should, colonel, they should."

"And must, major; I say must, for as our daughters married against our wishes, their children must marry to please us."

"Yes, colonel, they must, when they are old enough."

"When they are old enough, major, they will marry to suit themselves, so we must tie them down by making them wed now."

"But, colonel, remember their years, for—"

"Drat their years, sir, for thirteen and eighteen are not too young, when by royal decree infants in Europe have been wedded."

"No, sir, they must be sent for at once, and the hour they come they shall be married, for I am a justice of the peace as you know, and the civil is the most binding law in the land."

"When they are married, they shall have our blessings, and the boy shall start back at once to West Point and the girl to her boarding-school."

"What do you say, major?"

"I obey, colonel, my superior officer always."

Then write a telegram for your granddaughter to come here at once, and I shall wire the commandant of the Academy to send the boy home on a twenty four hours leave, for that will give him time to get there and back."

The telegrams were written, a servant was called and dispatched with them to the nearest station, and in response the following day there arrived from her boarding-school in New York a lovely young miss of thirteen, and a handsome youth of seventeen in cadet gray.

They met in the grand old home of the colonel, for the first time, and without more ado were told that owing to certain complications that might arrive in the future, regarding the inheritance that was to be theirs, and for other reasons not made known to them, they were to be united in matrimony, and then separated until each should have completed their education.

The two looked at each other in dumb amazement, but the will of the two old cronies was stronger than theirs, and hardly realizing the serious step they were taking, they stood up before the colonel, who was a magistrate, and were united in the solemn bands of matrimony.

An hour after the cadet was on his way back to West Point, while the young bride was allowed to spend the holidays at the colonel's home, after which she was escorted back to school by the major, who was returning to his home in the South.

Thus had the two old fools, to gratify a whim of their own, laid up sorrow and trouble after they had passed away for the two who had been left to their keeping.

CHAPTER II.

TRUE AS STEEL.

"DID you wish to see me, my man?"

The speaker was a young man clad in gray cadet uniform, and it was the day of the graduating exercises at the West Point Military Academy.

The one who had asked to see him was a man with iron gray hair and beard, and whose appearance was such that he would be classed as the tramp of to-day.

To the one whom he had asked to send after the cadet he had said:

"Tell him that one in sad distress wishes to see him for only a few minutes, and not to refuse my bidding."

"But he will, for to-day is the one of his life, as he is honor man of his class, has taken all the prizes, and will be too proud to speak to any one who is not his superior officer, or a pretty girl, for I know these young cadets."

"See here, my man, I am poor, but here is a dollar for you if you will bear my message."

The man accepted the dollar, went off to find the one he was sent after, and fifteen minutes later returned with the cadet and pointed out to him the one who had sent for him.

"Did you wish to see me, my man?" asked the cadet, and his manner was kindly, his bearing toward what appeared to be a vagabond, courteous.

"I did, sir," and the voice of the man quivered as he answered.

"Well, my man, tell me what I can do for you as quickly as you can, for this is my closing day and I am pressed for time, as you may know under the circumstances."

"And I have heard that you have won the honors, sir."

"Yes, I was so fortunate."

"Let me congratulate you, sir."

"Thank you," and the cadet pressed the hand of the vagabond.

"Now, my man, what can I do for you?"

"It is a pity that I should come here to cloud your young life upon the very threshold of your ambition, for look at you in all your pride and power, and behold me, in rags, journeying down-hill toward the grave, and yet you see in me one whom you have long believed to be dead."

The cadet seemed impressed by the words and look of the man, and said quickly:

"You are one whom I have long believed to be dead, my man?"

"I am."

"Are you sure, for candidly I do not know that I ever saw you before, unless sorrow and misfortune have so changed you that I fail to recognize you as an old friend."

"And would you claim such as me as an old friend?"

"Why not, if you were such?"

"Look at my rags."

"Fine clothes do not make the man."

"You are a noble youth, and I will keep you in suspense no longer."

"Who are you, for it seems that we have met before."

"Your mother is dead, I believe?"

"Yes, alas! I regret that she is not alive to witness my triumph to-day."

"And is your father dead?"

"Yes, he was lost at sea when I was a little boy."

"You are not sure?"

"I only know what has been told me, sir."

"You were told wrong, my son, for I am your father."

"Thank God, I have been told wrong, for glad am I to welcome you, my father!"

The meeting was a strange one, and the man shook visibly with emotion.

The youth had not a shadow upon his brow, but one of joy came over it, for what was it to him that the man was a vagabond in rags, for he was his father!

"My son, I will tell you my story, so that you can understand—"

"Not now, father, for my first duty is to make you comfortable. You must go with me to the hotel, while, as we are about the same size, I can rig you out in one of my suits until I can do better."

"Then, as I will have a leave, we will go to New York together, for I happen to have a couple of thousand in money, and until a few months ago was to inherit a large fortune."

"And why have you lost it, my son?"

"My grandfather speculated in his old age, sir, and all was swept from him."

"But, I have enough to fit you up, and having a profession can take good care of both of us, father."

"My son, I will not deceive you any longer, and I will detain you but a short while, for I know the calls upon your time."

"I was supposed to have been lost at sea, but instead I was wrecked upon the African Coast and for a long while was the prisoner of savages."

"At last I escaped, and from that moment it seemed fortune favored me, for I made money."

"I had learned of your mother's death, and that your grandfather had adopted you, so I

kept my secret of being alive, boarded up my gold, and a week ago landed in New York."

"I learned of your grandfather's failure and death, and I determined to see what kind of a son I had: so it was that I put you to the test by coming here as a vagabond."

"You stood the test nobly, and I'll tell you my son, at the hotel down on the cliff, I have rooms, and my proper clothing, for I donned this suit in the woods on my way here."

"I am a rich man, my noble boy, and you shall lose nothing by the way you welcomed me believing me to be a vagabond."

"Now, go back to your duties, and soon I will come and see you in a garb not to make you ashamed of your old father."

Thus had the cadet met the father whom he had believed to be a vagabond, and his noble nature had indeed been put to the severest test.

CHAPTER III.

PUT TO THE TEST.

"I WISH to see Convict Number Seventy."

The speaker was an old man, with white hair, and supported himself upon a gold-headed cane as though he felt its need.

He was well-dressed and looked like a man who had a large bank account.

"Here is my authority from the proper officials," he added, extending a paper.

It was Sunday morning and the prisoners of the Penitentiary where Convict Number Seventy was confined were preparing to go to church.

But the prisoner asked for was excused and the old gentleman was conducted to his cell.

The prisoner eyed him curiously, and failing to recognize him asked politely:

"May I inquire why I am honored with this visit, sir?"

"I have come to have a talk with you, my friend."

"You have been a long time within these walls have you not?"

"Yes, sir, and my stay here is for life."

"Why were you placed here?" and the old man gazed upon the strong, handsome, refined face of the prisoner in whose eyes dwelt a world of sadness.

"Do you not know, sir?"

"I do, but I wish your version of the affair."

"Why resurrect it from the past when it can do no good?"

"Leave that for me to decide, please, and tell me."

"I am here for alleged bank robbery, and murder of the night-watchman in charge of the bank."

"Were these charges proven against you?"

"They were not disproven and hence my sentence for life."

"Had they been proven I would have been sent to the gallows."

"Were you guilty?"

"I was not."

"You could not prove this?"

"I could not, for I was found in the bank with the murdered watchman."

"So you were sentenced to imprisonment for life?"

"I was, sir."

"Well, my poor, unfortunate friend, I have come to take you out."

"Take me out, sir?"

"Yes."

"I do not understand," gasped the prisoner.

"You have a wife and child?"

"I have a daughter, sir, but alas! her mother died a few months ago, believing that I had cruelly deserted her."

"Then she did not know the truth?"

"She did not, for when I was made a prisoner I was ashamed to give my own name so gave a fictitious one and under that was tried and sentenced, and those I loved never knew the truth of the affair, for I preferred to be thought to have deserted my wife and child than to be considered a burglar, murderer and lastly a felon."

"But you have heard from your wife and child from time to time?"

"I have heard of them from the kind clergyman who visits this prison, that is all."

"And your wife is dead?"

"Yes. She was a woman of superior education, a lady, and was disinherited for marrying me; but, later, her father forgave her and had my daughter in his keeping until recently."

"He invested his wealth in speculation with a brother officer of the army, and it was swept away from him."

"Unable to stand the shock in his old age he broke down, and died suddenly; it is hinted by some, ended his own life."

"And your child?"

"Having been left almost destitute has gone to teaching music and art."

"Well, my friend, let me now make your heart glad, though I pierce my own to do so:

"I had a son, a wild, wayward boy, who died only two weeks ago; upon his death-bed he made a confession, which I made him repeat before an officer of the law and other witnesses."

"This confession was that he had met a young man whom he had rendered a certain favor to, and whom he had inveigled into a trap, for he

told him that he was connected with a certain bank in Philadelphia, and had a large amount of money with him which he wished to put into the safe that night, but did not care to go alone.

"The young man believed his story, and waited for him in the rear door of the bank, which my son opened with a key which he had.

"Soon after, his friend heard a cry for help, and ran into the bank.

"A form flitted by him, a dark-lantern was upon the floor, and near it lay a man's body, a knife wound in his heart.

"The safe was opened, and some papers were scattered about the floor.

"At that moment in rushed two officers, who captured the young man, and his story that he had gone there with a friend, who was the bank's cashier, was not believed, for when he gave the name of his companion, no such person was known.

"He could prove nothing, and circumstantial evidence sent you to this place for life.

"This confession was made by my unworthy son, who sent for me when dying, and it was all authenticated, and hence I have come to see you.

"From here I go to the Governor of the State, and then I return to make you a free man, while I shall atone for my son's act by making your daughter my heir, as I have no one else who has a claim upon me; but first, I shall go to that daughter and tell her that her father is a felon, and if she wills, she can get him a pardon and make his latter days happy.

"If she consents, is willing to own her father, though a felon, she is worthy of the fortune I shall leave her, and then I shall tell her the truth, that you are innocent, and serving your unjust sentence under an assumed name.

"Expect to hear from me soon."

It was just ten days later when Convict Number Seventy received a telegram which read as follows:

"She well stood the test I put her to, so becomes my heiress.

"We come for you to-morrow, your daughter bringing your pardon, and your full vindication."

And the next day out into the free sunlight went the man who had suffered imprisonment for many long years, and yet was guilty of no crime!

CHAPTER IV.

THE OUTLAW'S PLEDGE.

FROM the scenes of civilization, in which were placed the happenings of the preceding chapters of my romance, I now transport my reader to the Wild West, the borderland which lies just beyond the halting place of the star of empire upon its march toward the setting sun.

This scene opens at night in the confines of a mining-camp, where are gathered hundreds of wild spirits struggling hard in the fight for fortune.

A man is pacing to and fro in a trail along a mountain ridge, stopping at every turn a second or two to listen, as though in fear, or expectation of some one's coming.

The moonlight falls upon his face and form, revealing the latter to be one of fine physique and powerful, while the former is clean cut and handsome.

His garb is the rough dress of the miner and about his waist is a belt of arms.

"The day is not very far distant and every moment of delay is dangerous to me.

"Why does she not come?" he said impatiently.

As he uttered the words he heard the sound of hoofs approaching and quickly stepped back into the shadow of the thicket bordering the base of the mountain range.

"There she comes at last.

"But I must not be too sure, for it may be some one else."

In a short while two horses appeared in sight, one of which had a rider on his back.

"Yes, it is Ruth," said the man.

As he spoke there arose on the air, as the rider came to a halt, the plaintive notes of a whip-poor-will.

The man stepped out of the shadows at once and said:

"Here I am, Ruth."

The rider sprang from the back of the horse and said:

"I rode the saddle I had for you, and these are two of the best horses in the mines.

"Where is your pack-saddle, brother?"

"Here it is," and the man drew it from among the bushes and proceeded to put it upon the led horse.

As the one who had joined him there stood where the light of the moon fell upon her, a face of wondrous beauty was revealed and a form of exquisite gracefulness of outline.

She was dressed in a close-fitting suit of buckskin, fringed and embroidered, wore a slouch hat with gold cord and sable plume, and about her slender waist was a belt of arms.

The man finished saddling the pack upon the horse, then made a halter of the long stake-rope and fastened it upon the horn of his saddle, which he carefully looked over to see that all was safe.

Apparently satisfied he said:

"Now, Ruth, I am ready to go, and I have about an hour and a half to travel before dawn."

"Yes, and you can get out of the creek before light, so have a good trail then to travel."

"Give me your instructions then."

"There is the creek, you see?"

"Yes, I see it," and the man turned toward a small brook a short distance away which crossed the trail they were standing in.

"Now put that pine bush down by the water and attach this rope to it, for I shall drag it back to the camps, wind it around a tree and have it appear as though a horse had broken loose from it.

"Dragging it over the trail will destroy the tracks of these horses, brother."

"Yes, it is a good idea.

"But now to my directions?"

"You are to follow down the stream until you come to the trail crossing it at Chalk Cliffs.

"There turn into the trail, which is well traveled, and bend your course southward at your will toward New Mexico, only push your horses all day, and when you halt to camp at night be careful to be on your guard, for Buffalo Bill can almost follow the trail of a bird, and if he pursues you, well you know what the result will be, my brother."

"Oh, yes, the gallows for me."

"Then be careful I beg of you, after all I have done to save you from dying upon the gallows."

"I shall risk my life no more than is necessary, you may be sure, sister mine."

"I trust so.

"But, now, brother Arden, here is the money I promised you, some gold, but mostly bills, and in all ten thousand dollars.

"You have told me that you were going to South America to begin life anew, to redeem your past, and atone for it.

"If you need more money, you know my address, at our old home, so write and I will send it to you, for I will not see you suffer.

"I have done all I could for you, Arden, and have now snatched you almost out of the hands of the hangman, to give you another chance, to save your life and your soul, and I must again ask you for the pledge you have already given me, that you will reform, and atone for your past crimes, which are many.

"Will you give me the pledge once more, brother Arden?"

"Certainly, if you ask it."

"I do, so take this sacred book again and take solemn oath that you are sincere in your repentance and intend to lead a new life from this very night, that you will bury your sins of the past, and your later crimes under the name of Silk Lasso Sam the Outlaw of the Overland."

The outlaw took the little book handed to him, pressed his lips to it fervently and took the solemn pledge asked of him.

Then he drew the beautiful girl toward him, embraced her lovingly and said:

"Farewell, my noble sister, and trust in me, your unfortunate brother."

"I will," was the sincerely uttered response, and with a bound the outlaw was in his saddle and riding into the stream had started upon his way, while his sister, taking the end of the pine bush, began to drag it slowly back over the trail to the camps half a mile away.

CHAPTER V.

BUFFALO BILL AND BONNIE BELLE.

THE home of the beautiful girl who had proven herself such a devoted sister to the outlaw Silk Lasso Sam, was in one of the wildest mining-camps in that wild land of the far West.

It was situated in Yellow Dust Valley, and though the miners' cabins were scattered far and wide along the ranges, they did most congregate at one end of a picturesque glen which was known as Pocket City.

The place was, as it were, in a pocket of the mountains, and also there had been found innumerable "pockets" of gold, hence it was doubly entitled to its name.

It was beautifully located, upon the banks of a limpid brook, with fine old trees about, and overhanging mountains, while there was an outlook far down Yellow Dust Valley.

A typical border settlement, it yet was noted for one peculiarity, its hotel and principal gambling saloon being run by a young girl.

The hotel was known as "The Frying Pan," and apart from it was the saloon, known as the "Devil's Den."

The hotel was a log and board structure built in the shape of a cross, and with two stairs in the center, while the "Den" was an acre in size and had been built as strong as a fort.

A stockade fence led from the rear of the Devil's Den to one wing of the hotel, which it surrounded, for there was the house of Bonnie Belle, the mistress of the place.

She had her flower-garden, arbor, piazza and several rooms, and not a soul ever dared intrude upon her.

The former proprietor of the hotel had been

wounded by road-agents when returning home in the very coach with Bonnie Belle, who was upon her way to Pocket City, for reasons she had kept to herself.

The maiden had defended herself so well that those in the coach had escaped robbery, and caring for the wounded landlord of The Frying Pan up to his death, he had made her mistress of his fortune.

Landlord Lazarus had been noted for keeping a good hotel and an orderly gambling den; but when Bonnie Belle had come into power, she had, as a miner expressed it, "made Rome howl."

To interpret, she had made the hotel neat in every particular, set as fine a table as could be found upon the border, allowed no liquor to be sold there, and ran the Devil's Den upon business principles, allowing no fraud in games, and selling liquors that were not as deadly in their effects as a bowie-knife and revolver.

She was respected by all, and no matter what had brought her there she was protected by one and all.

It was the second day following the departure by night of Silk Lasso Sam, that three horsemen rode into Pocket City and drew rein at The Frying Pan.

Two were in uniform, one wearing The shoulder-straps of a major of infantry, the other of a captain of cavalry.

The third horseman was a most picturesque looking individual, tall, graceful, fearless and handsome faced, a man who has since the time when he is presented to the reader, been the guest of kings and emperors, and whose name will long live in verse, romance and history, for the name that he bears is that of Buffalo Bill.

The three horsemen dismounted, their horses were led away to the stable by a Chinese servant, and entering the office they registered their names as follows:

"LIONEL LESTER, Major—th Inf'try, U. S. A.

"RICHARD CARUTH, Captain—th Cav., U. S. A.

"BUFFALO BILL, Chief of Scouts, U. S. Army."

Leaving the two officers to get the dust of the trail from their faces and uniforms, Buffalo Bill walked toward the right wing of the hotel, which was the quarters of Bonnie Belle.

Suddenly he met her face to face.

The maiden's face flushed, then paled, as she stretched forth her hand and said:

"Buffalo Bill, I am glad to see you."

"Is this sincere, Miss Arden?"

"Ah—do not speak of me here as other than Bonnie Belle.

"It was the name given me by Landlord Lazarus, who made me his heiress, for his daughter was so named, and he said I reminded him of her."

"Then, Bonnie Belle, are you sincere in saying that you are glad to see me?"

"Why not?"

"You know why I am here?"

"Yes, for you now know that I went to the fort as Miss Arden, the sister of Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw chief under sentence of death, and for the sole purpose of rescuing him.

"I would not have done one act, had I known bloodshed would follow; but I planned to have pretended detectives go for him with a requisition for the Governor of Illinois, and thus have him escape.

"He, with their aid, attacked Surgeon Powell and Horseshoe Ned, the driver of the coach, wounding the former, and I fear killing the latter.

"There was no cause for this, and I feel deeply that it should have been done.

"Surgeon Powell I brought here with me, and I am glad to say that he is not badly wounded."

"And I am glad to say that Horseshoe Ned was only stunned, not seriously hurt, the only man killed, Bonnie Belle, being your pretended detective, Raymond, whom Surgeon Powell shot."

"He can be spared," was the cool reply, and then Bonnie Belle continued:

"The Surgeon Scout you will find here, as I said."

"And your brother?"

"Sh! he is not known here as the brother of Bonnie Belle.

"I came here to find him, to save him, and Heaven grant that I have done so.

"He is now far beyond your reach; but are not those friends of yours?"

"Yes, Major Lester and Captain Caruth, whom you met while you were at the fort, and there is a troop and my band of scouts camped some miles from here, for we came upon the trail of Silk Lasso Sam."

"And he has escaped you; but I will send for Surgeon Powell, and he glad to meet you and your friends in my quarters, for we shall hardly meet again, as my mission on the frontier is done, and I go East very soon."

CHAPTER VI.

A VIGILANTE LOVER.

THE chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill, with Surgeon Frank Powell and the two other army officers, set out upon their return to the fort where they were stationed, and seventy odd miles from

Pocket City, with only feelings of kindness for the very remarkable maiden who seemed to hold the destinies of the Yellow Dust Valley miners in the hollow of her little hand.

They did not harbor an unkind thought of her, for her clever rescue from a fort of her outlaw brother Silk Lasso Sam.

The miners, knowing her only as Bonnie Belle, and not aware that Silk Lasso Sam was her brother, supposed that searching for the escaped outlaw had brought the troopers and scouts to the mines, and were glad, with few exceptions, that Bonnie Belle had treated them with such cordial hospitality, for they wished to remain on the right side of the army in case of trouble.

After the departure of Buffalo Bill and the soldiers, affairs settled down as before in Pocket City among the miners.

But all the while was Bonnie Belle making her preparations to go East.

She would not say that she was going not to return, for she well knew the result of such an admission, and so she sent for Scott King the big storekeeper of Pocket City and told him that she was compelled to go East for awhile, and wished him to assume the management of affairs at The Frying Pan and the Devil's Den until her return, or the coming of Deadshot Dean, a miner whom she had started East with some time before, but had turned back to accomplish the rescue of her brother.

Scott King was the captain of the Vigilantes of the valley, and also the "judge of the frontier court," as it was put, and that meant that his word was law.

"The clerk will report to you each day, Captain King, the earnings and expenses of the hotel, and my manager at the Devil's Den will do likewise, so that you can have as little trouble as possible, while I will also pay you liberally for your services."

"Don't mention it, Bonnie Belle," said the Vigilante captain who had a soft spot in his heart for the maiden.

"Yes, but I must mention it, for I intend you shall be well rewarded for your valuable services."

"Now when Deadshot Dean returns, you will turn over to his keeping all moneys and the charge of the hotel and Den, for I so arranged before his going East."

"I will strictly obey your orders, Bonnie Belle."

"But when do you leave us?"

"Within the week."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"And it is necessary for you to go?"

"It is important that I should do so."

The Vigilante captain sighed and said earnestly:

"I am very sorry, Bonnie Belle, for I fear you may never return."

"You have endeared yourself to every man in these mines, and we will all miss you sadly."

"How long will you be gone?"

"That I do not know."

"You will give me an address in the East where I can write you?"

"No, for I leave all in your management, and there will be no need to write, and Deadshot Dean will be back again before long."

"Well, you know best."

"But, when do you depart, did you say?"

"I shall take Four-in-hand Frank's coach out one week from to-day."

The Vigilante captain sighed and said, after a moment's hesitation:

"Of course I know that you have had half a hundred men wish to marry you, Bonnie Belle, and you know just as well as I do, that I love you with all my heart and soul, yet still I must tell you that I do."

"I am getting rich here, and I am of considerable importance here in the mines, being Captain of the Vigilantes, judge, and also storekeeper, so if you do feel that you can care for me then I want you to say so as frankly as you will if you don't care any thing for me—see?"

"I do like you very much, Captain King, for you have been one of my best friends while I have been here, and I thank you for the honor you show me in wishing to marry one of whom you know nothing whatever as to what I was before I came here."

"As for that, Bonnie Belle, you know nothing of me, for I may have been a burglar, a murderer or anything else bad before I came here."

"I believe that you were not a bad man and came simply to better your fortunes."

"But yet I have only friendship for you, can never feel other regard for you, and so we will not speak more upon this subject."

"That I place confidence in you is shown by my placing my property here in your hands, and I feel that you will do your best to protect it for me."

"I'll do it, Bonnie Belle, see if I don't," was the earnest reply of the handsome Vigilante captain, who had earned the reputation since coming to the mines of being an honest man, peaceable, yet dangerous to arouse and one who was a terror to evil-doers.

The day at last came around when Bonnie Belle was to say good-by to the miners for

awhile, and in honor of her departure all of them had struck work in Yellow Dust Valley, and had assembled to bid her good-by and wish her good luck.

After her going, two-thirds of them had decided to get drunk, and thus drown their grief by painting Pocket City a crimson hue.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASKED ROAD-AGENT.

THE coach bound east on its weekly run always left Pocket City after an early breakfast, and therefore from daylight began the miners to gather about The Frying Pan to bid farewell to Bonnie Belle.

Four-in-hand Frank, the driver, had kept two men rubbing up the coach and harness for a couple of days before leaving, in honor of the fair passenger, and he had his very best team of horses, six iron-grays.

He was a stalwart fellow, six feet in height, full bearded, clear-eyed, and with a certain devil-I-care air about him that was very taking.

Generous of nature, fearless, and a superb hand with the reins, he had come to Pocket City with a record as the best driver of four or six in hand, on the Overland trails, his only rival being Horseshoe Ned, who carried the coach out weekly from the fort.

"You'll ride on the box with me, Bonnie Belle?" he had said as she came out prepared for the start, and dressed in a neat traveling suit that was very becoming to her.

"Oh, yes, Frank, for I cannot bear to be housed up inside a coach," was the smiling reply.

A box had been placed for her feet to rest upon, and the softest cushion put by the side of the driver's seat.

"Good-by, comrades, and Heaven bless you for all your kindness to me," said Bonnie Belle, as she mounted to the box, Frank handing up her sachel after her, while her trunk had been placed in the boot behind.

There were no other passengers, and so, as Bonnie Belle was station-agent, as well as postmistress at Pocket City, she gave the order to start.

Then Four-in-hand Frank placed his bugle to his lips and gave a few ringing notes, while the miners yelled, cheered and shouted words of farewell as Bonnie Belle kissed her gloved hand to them again and again, her beautiful eyes being filled with tears at this demonstration in her honor.

Then away rolled the coach, while Bonnie Belle seizing the bugle sent forth with skill and pathos the notes of the song:

"Farewell, farewell is a lonely word
And always brings a sigh;
But give to me when loved ones part,
That good old word good-by."

And up the valley after the departing coach rolled a mighty chorus of voices united in singing:

"Auld lang syne."

"Waal, Bonnie Belle, I has been a long time on the plains, but I never seen anything quite come up to that farewell o' the miners to you," said Four-in-hand Frank, when the coach had swept by the weird canyon known as Hangman's Gulch, and was well upon its way.

"They have always been most kind to me, Frank."

"I came among them an unknown, unprotected girl, and they have treated me in every respect as they would have their own sister."

"It would have been a bad break for any man to make who treated yer different, Bonnie Belle; but yer will see Deadshot Dean, I believes, when yer goes East?"

"Yes, I am going to his home."

"His leetle house thar on ther hill looks mighty lonely now, don't it, all shut up as it is," and the driver pointed to a little cabin situated under the shelter of a mountain spur around which the coach trail ran.

"Yes, but he will soon be back to work his mine."

"So I has heard, and I is glad of it, for he's square as they make up, hain't afeerd o' ther devil and no other man in ther mines would live and hunt gold this near ther Hangman's Gulch as he did."

"I liked Deadshot Dean a heap, Bonnie Belle, and I does hope as how he'll strike it rich some day and make a fortin'."

"I hope so, too, Frank, for he deserves success."

And on swept the coach, Frank keeping his team at a steady gait until some score of miles had been gone over, when suddenly, as he halted to water his horses at a brook, a horseman wheeled into the trail before him, a rifle at his shoulder and called out in threatening tones:

"Hands up all, for I claim toll on this trail!"

"Thunderation! ef it hain't a road-agent, I hope I may die," cried Frank, though he quickly obeyed the order, expressed as it was by the muzzle of the rifle covering his heart.

"And I have not my belt of arms on," said Bonnie Belle, sadly.

The horseman was well mounted, and his face

was completely masked, so that recognition was impossible.

He rode close up to the wheel-horses, still keeping the driver covered, and said:

"Well, I said I demanded toll on this trail."

"Who in thunder is yer?" growled Four-in-hand Frank.

"A man whom it is not safe to trifle with, as you will find out if you delay longer, for my men are in ambush and have you covered."

"I has nothing to give yer, and he hain't goin' ter rob a lady?"

"I know no sex when gold is my game."

"Come, girl, I want money, or you go with me as ransom until I get it for your release."

"I have some money with me, yes, and I will give you all except what I need for my expenses," calmly said Bonnie Belle.

"Be quick about it then."

She took from her sachel a leather case with considerable money in it, and this she handed down to the masked road-agent.

"This is not all that you have, and you have jewels as well."

"Come, I know you, Bonnie Belle, and I want your money and jewels, or you go into captivity."

"Not that surely, when gold will buy me off."

"Here, take this money, too, and it is all I have, except a couple of hundred in my pocket-book."

"I want that, too, and your jewels also."

"Would you rob me of those?"

"Of everything, for I show no mercy."

With a sigh the young girl took a case of jewels from the sachel, her pocketbook and a few other valuables and handed them down to the robber.

"Ah! that is something like."

"Now drive on, Four-in-hand Frank, and keep me in mind for we shall meet again," and the masked road-agent still kept his rifle covering the driver until the coach rolled out of view.

CHAPTER VIII.

MET ON THE TRAIL.

"OF all mean critters I ever seen, Bonnie Belle, thet one are ther worst, and some day I'll see him hanged for this day's work."

So said Four-in-hand Frank after they had left the masked road-agent out of sight behind them.

"Do you know how much he has robbed me of, Frank?" calmly asked the maiden.

"I does not."

"Maybe a couple of thousand or so?"

"Of ten thousand dollars in money, and jewels worth half as much more."

"Fortunately I have some things with me, old souvenirs which he did not get."

"Oh, Lordy! but I wish I could hang him."

"You could have done nothing, Frank, for had you shown the slightest resistance he would have killed you."

"Sure, and I have just sense enough to know it too."

"But Lordy! you have lost big money, and the miners will be red-hot when they hears it."

"Did you ever see the man before, Frank?"

"Now yer has me, Bonnie Belle, for I thinks I has and I thinks I hasn't."

"Who do you think he is?"

"Waal, yer heerd thet Silk Lasso Sam, thet terror o' ther upper trails, has escaped from the fort?"

"Yes, I heard of it," was the low response of Bonnie Belle, while her face paled and her heart beat convulsively.

"Waal, Silk Lasso Sam has held me up quite often, and I kinder thought there was something in thet feller with the mask to remind me of him."

"But it is said that Silk Lasso Sam was slender of form."

"Thet's so, and this man were quite stout."

"Yas, I guesses it c'u'dn't hev been him, onless his weight hev increased a heap since he held up my coach last time."

Bonnie Belle gave a sigh of relief, and said:

"Well, I am glad to feel that it was not Silk Lasso Sam, Frank."

"So is I, miss, for he'd hev done more deviltry, sich as killing one o' my horses, slashing up my harness and coach curtains, for he were given ter doing ther meanest o' acts a man c'u'd do, especially when he got no boodle."

"I were in hopes thet we was clear o' robbers on the Overland but it seems we has still got ter risk 'em."

Bonnie Belle made no reply, for she was busy with her own thoughts.

The words of Four-in-hand Frank had half added to a suspicion that flashed upon her, when she heard the voice of the highwayman.

But then when she recalled that her brother's form was slender and graceful, and this man's was stout and awkward, and that she had seen that he wore a beard beneath his mask, she felt that she wronged him, and so said to herself:

"No, no, I will not doubt him, for surely it was not Arden."

"No, it could not be that he would so soon forget his pledge to me, and turn at the first opportunity to crime again, and worst of all could rob me."

"No, I will banish the suspicion at once."

After noon the coach turned into the trail that led from the fort to the Overland Junction, where the branch trails joined the main stem.

There they beheld a horseman suddenly appear before them and Frank called out quickly:

"Another hold-up!"

"No, that is Buffalo Bill," cried Bonnie Belle, as the horseman came at a lope toward them.

"So it be, and that means no road-agents is near," was the relieved response of the driver.

As the scout drew near Frank brought his team to a halt, and doffing his sombrero politely, Buffalo Bill drew rein by the coach and said:

"I am glad to see you, Miss Bonnie Belle."

"And we is glad ter see you, Buffalo Bill," the driver remarked.

"Ho, Four-in-hand Frank, I greet you, and congratulate you upon your pleasant company."

"Any other passengers?"

"Not one, Buffalo Bill."

The scout glanced into the coach and asked:

"And have you had no others than Bonnie Belle?"

"Not a soul, Bill."

"You expected there wd be one more, did you not, Buffalo Bill, and so headed off the coach?" and Bonnie Belle smiled wickedly as she asked the question.

The scout's face flushed, but he replied:

"I was not certain, but I thought I would be sure that there were no wolves in lamb's wool traveling East with you Bonnie Belle."

"I am glad to say there is not," was the maiden's reply, and then she added:

"But let me tell you that we have been held up on the trail to-day."

"Held up?"

"Yes."

"When and where?"

"Some few hours after leaving Pocket City, at the Willow Creek, was it not, Frank?"

"Thar's whar it were, Buffalo Bill."

"And who held you up?"

"Don't know, 'cause he wore a mask tbat hid him complete, Bill."

"And you were robbed?"

"Yes, he took from me my jewels and about ten thousand dollars in money; in fact, I will have to get money at the station to go on East with."

"This is an outrage."

"Describe the man, please."

"He was mounted upon a large blood bay, was a stout man, clad in buckskin, wore a black mask, and carried a repeating rifle and belt of arms."

"It was at the Willow Creek?"

"Yes."

"About two hours ago?"

"Just two hours ago."

"Did you see more than this one man?"

"No, but he said that he had others with him."

"You have heard nothing of Silk Lasso Sam, Frank?"

"Not a word, unless that robber was him, which I don't think he was."

"The description does not suit Silk Lasso Sam."

"I will go on and strike his trail however."

"Good-by, Bonnie Belle, and good fortune attend you," and raising his sombrero the scout was off like a rocket to find the trail of the masked highwayman.

CHAPTER IX.

BUFFALO BILL AND THE SURGEON SCOUT.

Two days after meeting the coach of Four-in-hand Frank, Buffalo Bill rode into the fort, better known along the border as Pioneer Post.

A more picturesquely situated post officers and men could not have asked for, or one more delightful as a frontier home, in spite of the dangerous locality it was in, as it was the sole barrier to keep back the Indians from sweeping down from their mountain strongholds beyond and laying waste the settlements and mining-camps.

Colonel Dunwoody the commandant was a true soldier and an accomplished gentleman and scholar, courteous to all, a severe disciplinarian yet the idol of his men.

He was the youngest man of his rank in the service, had won fame upon many a field and was a bachelor and a man of large wealth.

Light artillery, cavalry and infantry comprised his command, and situated upon a bluff overlooking the river the fort was looked upon as impregnable, with its force of a thousand soldiers, a scouting band under Buffalo Bill, half a hundred cowboys and a hundred or more hangers-on.

Many of the officers had their families stationed there with them so that there was plenty of society and every enjoyment that a frontier post could indulge in.

There was Lieutenant-Colonel Ravel De Sutro, next in command to Colonel Dunwoody, and he had his wife, a beautiful Mexican woman, and his maid and adopted daughter, Nina, a kinswoman of Mrs. De Sutro, dwelling in the fort.

The next officer in rank was Major Lionel Lester, and his lovely wife had as a member of

her household a cousin and school-girl chum, Clarice Carr, who with Nina De Sutro was a belle at the fort, in fact the two were known as the Rival Belles.

Captain Dick Caruth, or "Dashing Dick," as he was familiarly called, a gallant cavalry officer, one who was put down in the bachelor list, and a man of considerable wealth, also figures in this story, along with Lieutenant Vassar Turpin, the colonel's *aide-de-camp*, a handsome young officer, who like his chief was well blessed with this world's goods.

The surgeon of the post, Doctor Frank Powell, who had won fame as a borderman, being known as the Surgeon Scout, was another officer who plays the part of hero in my romance, while there were among the others at the post belles and beaux innumerable, who made up a little world of their own.

The colonel's quarters were built at his own expense, and were really fine for a border post.

Then came the quarters of the married officers, fronting on two sides of the Plaza, the bachelor quarters in a row to themselves, with a large club-house in the center.

A dance-hall and a church were over on The Bluffs, which was the social rendezvous and parole-ground of the officers and their families.

Then came the hospitals, storehouses, sutlers' stores, scouts' quarters, and the barracks of the men, with the "Settlement" beyond.

Having ridden into Pioneer Post, which I have endeavored to present to my readers, Buffalo Bill left his horse at his own quarters and made his way to the home of Dr. Powell, the Surgeon Scout.

The surgeon's quarters were at the end of Bachelor Row, and the doctor was lazily swinging in his hammock upon the piazza, and at the same time enjoying a cigar and a book.

He sprang up at the coming of the scout, and said in his hearty way:

"Ah, Bill, back again, I am glad to see, and I'll wager my word you have news."

"I have news, Frank," answered the scout, calling the surgeon by his first name, as he always did when they were alone, for they were born comrades, and had been for many a long year; in fact, each owed to the other his life, saved time and again upon many a deadly field and trail.

"I knew when you told me you were going off on a lone scout, that you had some particular object in view."

"I did, Doc, and I'll now tell you just what it was, for I wish to ask your opinion of certain happenings."

"Fire away, Bill," and the scout having taken a seat, the surgeon threw himself again in the hammock, after holding out a cigar to Buffalo Bill, who said:

"Thank you, no, I will not smoke now."

"My idea was when you left that you went upon a still hunt for Silk Lasso Sam, Bill."

"It was just what I did do."

"I believed all the while that Bonnie Belle had the outlaw concealed in the hotel."

"What made you think so?"

"Well, you know when he had me a prisoner, after his escape from the coach, he dispersed the men who had aided him and set out with me for Pocket City?"

"Yes."

"When we reached within a few miles of the mines Bonnie Belle came out to meet him and found me a prisoner."

"She set me free in short order, made me give my promise to have no trouble with her brother, and took me to The Frying Pan at night to care for me, leaving him at Hangman's Gulch when we went by."

"She then left the hotel and I am sure went after him and brought him there, and later, either hid him there, or sent him to Hangman's Gulch."

"I saw that you had the opinion that he was not far away and so determined to try and find him."

"That is just what I did go for, Frank, after our return to the post," said Buffalo Bill firmly.

CHAPTER X.

BUFFALO BILL'S OPINION.

"AND what was the result of your lone scout, Bill?" asked Surgeon Powell, impressed by the look and words of the scout.

"I will tell you."

"I am all attention, pard, so fire away."

"My idea was that the outlaw chief was being hidden by Bonnie Belle, and that she had not already sent him away as she said."

"Of course, with full appreciation of her clever rescue of him, her sisterly regard and desire to have him escape the country, after his pledge of reformation, I had to do my duty, for he was to me no more than Silk Lasso Sam, the Outlaw of the Overland."

"Very true, Bill."

"You know, too, I regarded his pledges of becoming a better man as I do death-bed repentances, for he seemed incapable of doing further harm, so was willing to reform."

"Doubtless, as death-bed penitents do."

"Now I wanted to catch Silk Lasso Sam, and then wipe out the shame of his escape from the fort."

"It was so clever though, Bill."

"Granted, yet it was the girl's work not his, and being free I feared he might be tempted to do as Rip Van Winkle did, swear off, but not count that time."

"Very likely, for his rescue might embolden him to turn outlaw again."

"That was just my opinion, and so, believing that he was in or near Pocket City, I decided to try and catch him by going down the Overland Trail for a hundred miles and meet the coaches as they went eastward."

"I see."

"Bonnie Belle told us she was going East, and it entered my mind that in disguise Silk Lasso Sam might accompany her."

"Bravo for you, Bill."

"So I camped on the trail and met the coaches."

"At last I came upon the coach out of Pocket City with Four-in-hand Frank on the box, and by his side was Bonnie Belle."

"Good!"

"They evidently at first thought I was a road-agent, but Bonnie Belle recognized me and the coach halted."

"And who was inside?"

"Not a soul."

"Then you were wrong in your surmise?"

"As far as Bonnie Belle taking the man East with her was concerned, yes."

"But they had a story to tell?"

"Yes."

"I glanced into the coach and saw that they were not deceiving me, that it was empty, and then Bonnie Belle told me that a masked road-agent had held them up on the trail, some hours after leaving Pocket City."

"Ah! that is startling news, for I supposed all of the road-agents were accounted for."

"This man held up the coach, covering Four-in-hand Frank with a repeating rifle, and he robbed Bonnie Belle of every dollar she had and jewels as well."

"Infamous!"

"But it could not have been her brother who did this."

"That is just what I wish your opinion of, Frank, when you have heard my story."

"You shall have it, Bill."

"This road-agent I got a description of."

"He was mounted upon a large blood-bay horse, with cowboy saddle and bridle, and the man carried a repeating rifle and belt of arms, and was dressed in buckskin."

"And was masked?"

"Yes."

"Then it was doubtless Silk Lasso Sam or one of the band we missed catching, though I cannot understand why the outlaw should rob his noble sister."

"Silk Lasso Sam would stop at the commission of no crime in the calendar of wickedness, Frank."

"But this man was not the outlaw chief, unless he has grown a long beard and has increased in weight some sixty pounds in the ten days since I have seen him."

"A long beard you say?"

"Yes, it extended below the mask curtain."

"And has increased in weight."

"The highwayman was a very stout man both Bonnie Belle and Frank assured me."

"Might the beard not have been false, and the fat extra padding to more thoroughly disguise him, Bill?"

"Just my opinion, Frank, and now that you are of the same way of thinking I believe we are on the right trail."

"We will talk it over."

"I could see that Bonnie Belle had the same dread, and it was a relief to see that the man had a long beard and was stout, or otherwise she would have vowed that it was her outlaw brother."

"As I now begin to feel that it was, though I did not believe that the wretch could be so base as to rob the noble girl who had saved him from the gallows and provided for him so liberally."

"That cuts no figure in my opinion of the man, Doc, for he would do anything."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Went to the scene of the hold-up, of course."

"And then?"

"I found where the man had been lying in wait, and his trail led from the spot by the way he had come."

"You followed it?"

"Yes, I followed it to the main trail southward and there lost it amid the many tracks that traveled that way."

"I decided that the man had a hiding-place somewhere along the trail leading to Pocket City, and yet I could not find where it branched off."

"That was a pity; but if it came from that direction and went around to where the coach was held up, it would appear to me that it was either a miner in Pocket City playing road-agent, knowing that Bonnie Belle would have plenty of money with her, or—"

"Or what, Frank?"

"Or that it was Silk Lasso Sam who, before leaving the country, lay in wait to rob his sister to get more money to take with him, and disguised himself so as not to be recognized by her."

"That is just my opinion," was Buffalo Bill's emphatic response.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COMMANDANT AT HOME.

COLONEL DUNWOODY sat in his pleasant quarters lost in deep meditation.

His thoughts seemed far away, and his face showed varied emotions as his mind flashed from one memory to another.

He was a handsome man, with soldierly bearing, courtly manners and a certain fascination about him that was very winning.

There was a romance in the life of Colonel Dunwoody which the public eye had never penetrated.

It was said that in his early life he had loved and lost, but such was not the truth.

He had loved, and it was a portrait that he had fallen in love with.

He had seen it at an art exhibition, and learned that it had taken the first prize, a medal of gold and a thousand dollars, which had come too late for the artist, who had taken his own life in the despair of unrequited love.

The portrait was the likeness of the artist's lady love, one who had refused him for another, and thus wrecked his life.

The colonel bought the portrait and said to an intimate friend:

"I shall never marry unless I can meet a woman who has that face, for I could not love another."

And so the colonel had gone through life, carrying the portrait with him, and watching and waiting for the real of the ideal.

It was thought by close observers that Clarice Carr had won him, with her superb face and form, a queen among women, and then others had asserted that it was not Clarice, but Nina De Sutro, with her Spanish beauty, who had caught the colonel in the meshes of love.

Both Clarice Carr and Nina De Sutro had had romances of their own, too, in life, but they were not open to the gaze of the curious but locked in their own hearts.

But it was soon whispered that the colonel was still heart whole and fancy free as far as they were concerned.

Then there had come in the coach to the fort one day a maiden in mourning.

She had sought the colonel and introduced herself as Miss Ruth Arden, the sister of the outlaw then lying in irons awaiting the day of his execution upon the gallows.

Colonel Dunwoody had started at sight of her.

Was it because such a woman was the sister of the outlaw chief Silk Lasso Sam?

Not altogether, for he had seen in Ruth Arden the real of his ideal love, the image of the portrait he had so long loved and treasured.

And in talking with her when he showed her the portrait, he had discovered that it was her mother who had been the one whom the artist had loved.

Of course Ruth Arden saw her brother at will, the few days she was at the fort, and she was the guest while there, at the colonel's request, of Clarice Carr at the home of Major and Mrs. Lester, and she won their hearts completely, for she was known as Bonnie Belle, the idol of Pocket City.

And though while there Miss Arden had successfully plotted the rescue of her brother, going to Chicago even to accomplish her end, Colonel Dunwoody had felt for her no unkind thought, but had regarded her the more highly for her splendid pluck and cleverness.

When Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill told him that Miss Arden was none other than Bonnie Belle, he said that she had written him a full confession to that effect, and had offered no other excuse for her rescue of her brother than that she loved him, and wished to save him from a death upon the gallows.

And now as the colonel sat alone in his quarters he was thinking of Ruth Arden, the woman whom he had said in confidence to Surgeon Powell that he hoped some day to win.

"She came here, Powell, playing the part she has, to save that outlaw, to find him and reform him."

"She believes that she has done so and she has gone to her home in the East."

"I believe wholly in her purity and honesty, and one of these days I shall seek her and ask her to be my wife."

So the colonel had said, and Surgeon Powell had replied:

"And I feel sir, that you can never find a nobler woman, one to make you a truer wife, for I have studied her well from the first time I ever saw her, Colonel Dunwoody."

With this little secret love affair known only to Surgeon Powell, Colonel Dunwoody was content to bide his time until he could go East and seek Ruth in her own home, for she had written him, in reporting the rescue of her outlaw brother, and her regret that life had been

taken and Surgeon Powell was wounded, that she intended to give up her life on the frontier, for with Silk Lasso Sam free there was no further need of her leading it.

In the midst of his reveries, as he now sat alone in his quarters, the orderly entered and announced Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill to see the colonel.

"Admit them, orderly," was the prompt reply.

The colonel arose and greeted his visitors in his courtly way, and Surgeon Powell said:

"Colonel Dunwoody, Cody has just returned from a scout, and I suggested that he lose no time in reporting to you that the Overland Trails are not free of road-agents."

"Ah! you surprise me."

"But sit down, please, and, Cody, tell me at once what you have to report."

CHAPTER XII.

THE TELL-TALE KNIFE.

COLONEL DUNWOODY heard the scout's report of his waiting on the trail, hoping to catch Silk Lasso Sam making his escape eastward, and he said:

"Well, Cody, I cannot but feel that you were right in wishing to catch this man, and it would be my duty, and one I would not shirk from, to hang him immediately upon his capture."

"We are gravely reflected upon in the East for not putting down outlawry on the border, and for not preventing outbreaks among the Indians; but I wish those who are offering criticisms all the time would but come West and take command for a short while and see if they would not be more lenient toward us."

"Now, what is your idea about this highwayman?"

"I think, sir, it was Silk Lasso Sam."

"And yet would he rob his sister in such a way?"

"Yes, sir, he would do anything that was mean."

"And what do you think, Surgeon Powell?"

"I agree with Cody, sir."

"Then he must have been disguised, or if some one else did the robbing he was in the background as the leader."

"There was but one trail of a horse, sir, leading to and from the place of the holding up of the coach," said Buffalo Bill.

"Then that is proof that there was no one else there?"

"It is, sir."

"Well, I would give much to know that it was the outlaw chief."

"I think I have proof that it was, sir."

"What is your proof, Cody?"

"Silk Lasso Sam had a very small foot."

"I observed that when he was my prisoner."

"He wore cavalry boots, sir, and had very high heels on them."

"Yes."

"He had them on when he went from here under the charge of the pretended detectives."

"Yes, so he did."

"Now, in following the trail of the horse that went to the Yellow Dust Valley, I noticed that there was a footprint along, as though a man was walking either by the side of the horse or in front of him at times."

"That is so, Bill, for the outlaw walked, while I being wounded and in irons rode his horse."

"I saw as much, Surgeon Powell, and I noted the footprint well."

"Now, after robbing Bonnie Belle, this highwayman rode to a stream some miles distant and dismounted, I believe to count over his booty."

"He led his horse to water at a creek, for there were his tracks, and he sat down upon a drift-log to count his money, for I saw his tracks there, and more, found this penknife and a gold ten-dollar piece which he had dropped."

"The knife was stuck in the log where he sat, and he had taken it out to cut the strings which bound up the bank bills."

The colonel took the knife and gold piece and looked at them critically.

Then he said:

"What about the tracks, Cody?"

"They were made by a small foot, sir, arched and with high heels."

"That is pretty fair proof that it was not the footprint of a man weighing as much as this highwayman appeared to do."

"I am very sure of that, sir, for the track was made by a boot under a five in size."

"And the knife, can that not be made a clew, sir?" asked Surgeon Powell.

"How so, Powell?"

"When the outlaw was brought in a prisoner, sir, he was doubtless searched by the officer of the day, and all that he had was taken from him, that might prove dangerous for him to keep."

"You are right, and the officer of the day would recognize the knife, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was Captain Caruth who searched him, Colonel Dunwoody," said Buffalo Bill.

"Orderly!"

In answer to the call of the colonel the orderly appeared.

"My compliments to Captain Caruth and say that I would like to see him at my quarters immediately."

The orderly saluted and departed, and the colonel went on to say:

"If it is proven that this highwayman is Silk Lasso Sam, then he is still determined to hang upon the Overland Trails, and we will have our work to do over again, Cody."

"Yes, sir, and I am going to brand every outlaw I can catch, so that we will know him should we meet him again," said the scout with a sudden earnestness.

"But how can you brand them, Cody?" asked the colonel.

"I do not just now know, sir, but there are men I suspect even in this fort, and I am determined that if guilty they shall not escape."

"If that highwayman was Silk Lasso Sam, then I am going to ask, Colonel Dunwoody, to at once pick my men and go upon his trail, for he is too dangerous a man to go at large."

"I agree with you there perfectly, and should he organize a band he can give us no end of trouble; but here is Captain Caruth."

Just then handsome, Dashing Dick Caruth entered, and the colonel asked:

"Captain Caruth, I would like to know if you searched the prisoner, Silk Lasso Sam, when he was captured?"

"I had it done, sir."

"What did you find upon him?"

"His weapons, a belt of money, a large penknife, a map, watch and chain and some jewelry."

"What was done with the things?"

"All were returned to him, sir, when he went off with the supposed detectives, sir."

"Would you know the penknife?"

"Yes, sir, for it had a very odd handle."

"Is this the knife?"

"It is, sir," was the reply after a quick glance at the knife held up for him to look at.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S BRAND.

THE tell-tale penknife seemed pretty positive proof that the man who held up Four-in-hand-Frank's coach and robbed Bonnie Belle was none other than the maiden's unworthy brother Silk Lasso Sam.

If not, then it was some man who had just as small a foot, and in some way had gotten hold of his penknife.

The colonel seemed the most disturbed of all at this discovery.

He had been glad of the escape of the outlaw chief, for it had kept him from signing his death sentence, a fact which would have stood in the way of his winning the love of Bonnie Belle.

Though acting in the discharge of his duty, Ruth was not the one to wed the man whose signature had sent her brother to the gallows, no matter what that brother might have been.

The colonel had most sincerely hoped that Silk Lasso Sam, taught by his narrow escape and past experience, had gone at once on his way out of the country.

But if this was not the case then he had remained with the sole motive of again haunting the Overland Trails.

That he had, if he had been the lone highwayman, begun in a most merciless way was proven by his having robbed his own sister, and to others he certainly would be wholly without mercy.

The colonel wanted an end put to the man, but he did hope that he would be killed by Buffalo Bill and not brought again a prisoner to the fort.

"Well, Cody, I guess the man who robbed Frank's coach was none other than Silk Lasso Sam after all, if this penknife is any proof," said Colonel Dunwoody.

"I feel certain of it now, sir, and I would now like to ask, sir, to be allowed to hunt him down in my own way, and with my own men, sir, as the Indians are very quiet now, and we can be spared," said Buffalo Bill.

"All right, Cody, go your own way about it and take your own time, and I hope you may catch him, or kill him, before he holds up any other coach."

"I hope so too, sir, and I thank you for the permission, Colonel Dunwoody, and the scout and Surgeon Powell soon after took their leave, the latter remarking as they walked along:

"Bill, do you wish to do the colonel a favor?"

"I do indeed, Doc."

"Well, I am very sure that if you caught Silk Lasso Sam alive, and then did some little hanging upon your own account, you would confer a lasting obligation upon the colonel."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, or if you did not take him alive, killed him in fact, and brought in his lamented remains as proof of your good work, it would please him the more."

"I see; the colonel does not wish to have to hang the man himself?"

"I am sure that he does not."

"Thanks for the advice, Frank, and now I have a favor to ask of you."

"Granted, of course, Bill."

"I know that red-hot iron will brand a man, but I do not wish to be cruel even to a foe, and I am also aware that you can prick in a brand with India ink, but life is too short to do that upon an enemy, you know."

"Rather."

"Now, as you appear to know everything, I want you to tell me something I can use for a brand so that it will be lasting, and if I put it upon a man I suspect, he cannot get rid of it?"

"I do know, Bill, just what will do."

"Good!"

"What is it?"

"When I lived among the Indians I studied all of their tricks and devices, as you know, and from an old medicine chief I learned just what will come into use for you now."

"I shall be more than glad to get it, Frank."

"There is an acid the Indians make from the juice of certain plants, and it is of a blood-red color."

"It blisters when it touches the flesh, and when the sore heals it leaves a light red scar."

"That is just what I want, Doc, for I happen to have a cut of my initials, B. B., and I can put buckskin over them, then dip it into this acid and stamp my brand upon the flesh."

"Now I shall put my brand on any man I catch in lawless work, and if he escapes in any way afterward I will know him when I see him."

"Now there is one of the prisoners here at present, one of the band of Silk Lasso Sam, but he proved his innocence in some way and so escaped sentence with the others, and yet though ordered to be set free by the colonel, he still hangs around the fort, so I shall try my brand upon him and then keep my eye upon him, for if his chief goes on the trail to rob again that fellow will know it and become his spy."

"Well, Bill, come to my rooms and you shall have the acid I speak of, for I happen to have a small bottle of it which I saved."

"I'll do it, sir, and I'll bring that outlaw with me to try an experiment on him of the brand."

"All right, I'll be ready for you, and if I tell you to first try the brand on yourself do not fear, for it will be red ink in your case, and when I hand it to you again, it will be the acid for the man you wish to mark."

"I understand," said the scout, and a quarter of an hour after he returned to the surgeon's quarters with the man who had so narrowly escaped sentence with the comrades in whose company he had been found.

"The doctor and I are trying experiments, Buck," said the scout, and after applying red ink on the stamp to his own hand, he dipped it into the acid for the back of the other's hand.

There was little pain felt, but the man was branded for life with a red scar of the letters B. B.

And that night the suspected man mysteriously disappeared from the fort.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MINER'S ROMANCE.

In a pretty cottage home in the suburbs of a Southern village, are found those whose lives and romance are interwoven with the threads of this story.

The house is a pleasant one, and all about rests an air of comfort and contentment, for a cow feeds in a pasture near, a horse is cantering about an adjoining field at play with a little pony, fowls are in the barnyard, a vegetable garden is in the rear and flowers innumerable blossom near the house.

In a pleasant room in one wing sits a man with gray hair and beard before an easel, painting a portrait of a man who is sitting for him and dressed in miner's costume, with belt of arms about his waist and pick and shovel in his hand, the background being a hole dug in a cliff, the mine.

The miner is represented as glancing earnestly upward as though in thankfulness at having "struck it rich," for in his hands are several lumps of yellow gold.

The miner is a splendid specimen of manhood, handsome in face, of superb physique, and with an expression which only one who had a good heart could possess.

Near him upon the floor playing with a puppy is a little boy, bright and fearless faced, while by the window sewing, is a young and lovely-faced woman.

Such was the home and family of Deadshot Dean, as the miner was known in Pocket City, for these were his wife, child and father-in-law.

The son of a widowed mother, who had been beggared by the death of her husband, Carrol Dean had fallen in love with pretty Kathleen Clyde, the daughter of a poor artist, to find that he had a rival in the son of a rich planter living near.

Mrs. Clyde, then living, in her ambition had sought hard to have her daughter wed the rich planter's son, though he had led a wild, dissipated life young as he was, had taken the life of a fellow student in a duel in Germany at the University, afterward had been dismissed from the Navy of the United States and was known to be generally bad.

But Arden Leigh had at last returned to the parental roof-tree and vowed to his father and young sister that he intended to lead a different life, and they had believed him.

They had seen his attentions to Kathleen Clyde and hoped that she would be the saving of him.

But ever arrogant he had wooed her in a commanding way, and meeting there Carrol Dean, had demanded that she take her choice then and there between them.

She had not hesitated an instant in doing so, and Carrol Dean had been that choice.

Maddened by her act the young planter had drawn a pistol and fired full at his successful rival, who fell, as all believed, dead at the feet of Kathleen.

Arden Leigh made good his escape, and forging his father's name went off upon his wanderings with a large sum of money, to go still further downward in his evil career until the reader recognizes him in Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw.

Carrol Dean, by the devoted nursing of Kathleen, at last recovered, and his mother having died he found among her effects a map and claim to a gold mine in the far West, bought by his father from a friend in distress.

He wedded Kathleen, and at last, as ill-fortune seemed to dog his steps, he went West to see what luck had in store for him in the old mine.

To his delight he found that he could make it pay, and hoping for greater success in the end he had struggled on for years at his work, sending his gold home as he dug it.

He had not hidden himself under a false name, but he had won a record as a shot, and a man it would not do to press too far, and was known in Yellow Dust Valley as Deadshot Dean.

Planter Leigh, after his son's act and flight, had disinherited him and gone abroad with his young daughter Ruth.

He had, as his health failed, gone to California and purchased a ranch, where he had died, leaving Ruth his sole heiress.

But she had never ceased to love her wicked brother, had secretly corresponded with him and aided him, and after her father's death she had decided to hunt up Arden Leigh and reform him.

It was this resolve which had carried Ruth to Yellow Dust Valley, where she had hoped to find her brother, and how she was made the heiress of The Frying Pan and Devil's Den has been seen.

At last she found her brother in Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw chief of the Overland.

It was a cruel blow to her, but she did not despair of yet saving him, when suddenly she learned that he and his band had been run down and captured by Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell under the guidance of Deadshot Dean the miner.

Though she was unknown to him, Ruth had recognized her brother's old rival, Carrol Dean, and she made herself known to him, and having discovered that there was no hope of her brother, decided to go East with the miner, who was going to visit his family after a long separation.

On the way she had a letter from her brother appealing to her to save him from the gallows and pledging his word to live a different life.

She had heeded his call, had let Deadshot Dean go on without her, and that she saved the outlaw's neck has been seen.

And such is the romance of the man who sits there in his home, while the old artist, his wife's father paints his portrait.

Presently a servant enters and hands to the miner a letter.

He breaks the seal and after a glance at it cries:

"It is from Bonnie Belle, wife, and she is at her old home."

CHAPTER XV.

THE MISTRESS OF EDEN VALLEY.

The miner had told his wife and her father all of his adventures upon the far frontier.

He had told them how he had won his name of Deadshot Dean when attacked by a gang of desperadoes, and again how he had been forced to defend himself, his cabin home, and his mine, until men began to feel that he was able to take care of himself, and hence let him alone.

He also told them how one day he had seen a gang of desperadoes having Buffalo Bill a prisoner, bearing him to Hangman's Gulch under the plea that he was Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw.

He had met the scout once before, and recognizing him, had gone to his rescue, saving him from being strung up, but not until he had killed the ringleader of the gang, Powder Face Pete.

It was thus that Deadshot Dean had been made the secret spy, or detective for the Government in Yellow Dust Valley, and had aided in tracking Silk Lasso Sam and his band to earth.

Of course the miner told of his strange meeting with Ruth Leigh, in the character of Bonnie Belle, the Idol of Gold Dust Valley, and how she had gone there to find and reform her wicked brother Arden.

Of course, then, when he said that the letter

was from Bonnie Belle, all knew who it was from, and Kathleen said quickly:

"Oh, I am so glad!"

"Read it, Carrol, at once."

"You say that she has returned home, Carrol?" the artist asked.

"Yes, sir, she is now at her old plantation home of Eden Valley, for this letter is sent from there."

"Read it, Carrol," urged his wife again, and her husband obeyed, reading as follows:

"EDEN VALLEY, {
Thursday."

"MY DEAR BROTHER CARROL, for as you said you would be a brother to me, I so call you

"You will doubtless be surprised to have a letter from me, written from Eden Valley, when you supposed I was away out West in the wilds of Yellow Dust Valley."

"But no, I am here at my home, the birthplace of three generations of our name, and I arrived but yesterday, greatly to the surprise of the old family servants who still cling to the last of my race, myself, for my brother is dead to all here and will never return."

"But let me tell you all that has happened since you and I parted upon the Overland Trail."

"You remember that Arden's appeal for help caused me to turn back."

"Well, I plotted to rescue him, and I did so."

"How, it matters not, but where I had planned a bloodless release, it turned out that one of the men in my pay, with my brother, sought the lives of Surgeon Powell and Horseshoe Ned, and the result was the man was killed by the Surgeon Scur."

"The surgeon and Horseshoe Ned were both wounded, but my brother escaped, and came to Pocket City with me."

"As Buffalo Bill was upon his trail, I at once decided to send him away, and he departed at night, well equipped and supplied with money, and having given me his solemn oath never to do a wrong act again, and to atone for the past all that lay in his power."

"He made his way to Mexico, and from thence goes to South America to enter into business and make it his home."

"He never will, for Arden Leigh can never repent, reform or be guilty of a good deed."

"Poor girl! he had cruelly deceived her," said the miner earnestly.

Then he resumed reading the letter.

"Having accomplished my purpose in becoming what I had, I at once decided to start East and so placed Scott King, the storekeeper, and Vigilante captain, in charge until your return, when you promised you would settle up my affairs for me."

"Of course I did not let the people know I was not coming back again."

"I rode on the box with Four-in-hand Frank, whom you know, and we were held up by a masked road-agent and I was robbed of ten thousand dollars in money and all my jewels."

"I'll wager my mine that Arden Leigh was that masked road-agent," cried the miner excitedly.

"Oh, Carrol, you surely wrong him this time, for would he rob his own sister after all she has done for him?"

"Ay would he, Kathleen, he would rob the dead body of his mother, for I know him," was the indignant reply of the miner.

"You certainly have had reason to know him, Carrol," said the artist, still busy with his painting.

"But the letter, Carrol."

So the miner continued:

"I had to get money at the station to come on with, and give an order to Frank for it on Scott King when he went back to Pocket City."

"I fear there are those who will say that the road-agent was my unfortunate brother, but he was not, as he was a large, stout man with a long beard."

"There, Carrol!" said Kathleen in an exultant tone.

"The beard could have been false, and he could have padded his form to make it stout, but let us read on:

"Well, my brother, I have no more to say other than that I am at home, and here you must all come to live, for it is your home, and what is mine shall belong alike to you all."

"I shall patiently await a visit from you and your sweet wife, who I know will be a sister to me."

"Do not fail to bring your little boy, and Mr. Clyde also, for all are more than welcome at Eden Valley Plantation, I assure you."

"Awaiting your coming, believe me,

"Affectionately,

"RUTH LEIGH."

CHAPTER XVI.

LEAVES FROM THE PAST.

WHEN the letter of Ruth Leigh had been read, Carrol Dean glanced at his watch and said:

"Wife, shall we go at once?"

"I was just going to suggest it, Carrol, for I long to see Ruth, whom I remember as a sweet little miss of fourteen and loved dearly."

"Only think through what she has passed since those days when she was entering her teens."

"She saved your life, you have told me, and she shall indeed be my sister."

"And a daughter to me," the artist said, and then added:

"Yes, we'll hitch Monarch to the carryall and drive down to Eden Valley this afternoon."

"I'll ride Dot," suddenly spoke up Master Kit Clyde, the son and heir of the Deans.

Half an hour after, Monarch was trotting

briskly along with the grown people in the carryall while Kit came behind riding upon Dot.

Eden Valley had been closed for many a long year, but the grounds had been kept in good condition by the overseer, and the house had been regularly aired, so that it by no means looked like a deserted place.

There were many sad memories clinging about it for Ruth Leigh, but she had learned to face the severest ordeals and to cast them behind her relentlessly.

Clad in a well-fitting dress that was very becoming to her, she looked very beautiful as she paced up and down the broad piazza, gazing upon the grand scene spread out before her.

The plantation was at the head of the valley, the large, old-fashioned mansion nestling in a grove of majestic oaks on a hill, and commanding a superb view of the vale and river that came under the gaze of one standing upon the piazza.

Suddenly the eyes of Ruth fell upon a carriage turning into the massive gateway.

"Ah! they are coming!"

"It was kind of them to come so soon," and as the carryall halted at the steps she was there to receive them.

Warm indeed was the greeting given her by Kathleen Dean, and both the artist and Carrol Dean extended the same cordial welcome to her back to her girlhood home.

"And this is little Kit?" said Ruth, and the boy was clasped to her arms and carried up the stairs, while Kathleen called out anxiously:

"Ah, Ruth, he is too heavy for you, for I cannot lift him."

"Oh, no, not too heavy for me, as my Wild West life has given me muscles of iron, and—" she paused for a moment and then added bitterly:

"And a heart of flint, as your husband can tell you, Kathleen."

"No, he can tell me no such thing, for he has already said that you were all tenderness and goodness."

"Yes, you could never grow callous, Bonnie Belle—I beg your pardon, for it is Ruth now."

"No, you have never been hardened by contact with the world."

"And yet, brother Carrol, you know that I have been forced, in saving life, to take human life."

"Do you think these are cheery memories for a young girl—for I am still young, am I not, Kathleen—to have upon her conscience?"

"I lay no act at your door, Ruth, that is not just."

"The surgeon often has to cut deep to cure, and you have acted often with seeming heartlessness that good may come of it."

"No, no, you are all honor to-day and true as steel to yourself and those you love, so do not expect me to disparage you, for I could not if I would."

"That is right, Carrol, do not let her slander herself," said Mrs. Dean, while little Kit looked up into Ruth's face and said:

"You could not be bad, for I can see your heart in your eyes."

Ruth drew the boy convulsively to her an instant, and then said:

"But what a hostess I am, not to ask you into the house, a house that is to be your home, for I will not have it otherwise; I will not live here alone, so you must rent, or sell your cottage and come here all of you."

"Now come in."

She led the way into the grand parlor, furnished with handsome old-style furniture and portraits upon the wall.

There hung the likeness of her parents, her mother's strangely like the portrait of the artist in the possession of Colonel Dunwoody, and a striking likeness to it was Ruth Leigh herself.

"What a startling painting!" said the old artist, standing in front of a large painting, representing a handsome young man seated at a table throwing dice with a skeleton form of Death, while in the background was an angel form, beckoning to the young man, and with the same face that was in the portrait of Mrs. Leigh.

"That painting, Mr. Clyde, was the last work of the young artist who loved my mother."

"Refused by her he became dissipated, squandered his all and then painted this picture, and with the last touch of his brush died, for he was found dead in his chair."

"My father bought the painting, and I prize it highly," said Ruth.

Then turning to the likeness of a handsome youth of sixteen in sailor garb, she continued:

"That is a painting of my poor brother Arden when he was a midshipman before he had stamped his brow with dishonor and crime."

"It is a noble face there, yet how little we can judge what is behind the human face, for what has not poor Arden become!" and seeing that her eyes were dim with unshed tears Carrol Dean hastily changed the subject from bygone memories.

CHAPTER XVII.

A LETTER FROM POCKET CITY.

AS Ruth Leigh was determined in her resolve to have no refusal, but that the Deans should come to Eden Valley to live, they were at last won over to consent to do so.

The cottage was rented at a fair sum, and those who had so long found a home there were removed to Eden Valley.

The mansion was a very large one, with over twenty rooms and was furnished throughout most comfortably, so that there was a studio for Mr. Clyde, a room for little Kit and everything was done for the happiness and luxury of all.

Horses and carriages were in the stables and no one could have desired a happier home.

Ruth had tried to persuade Carrol Dean not to go back to the West, but to take the management of her estate, for she was a very rich young lady.

But the miner urged that he had just begun to "strike it rich," when he left and he had hopes that his mine would pan out a fortune for him yet.

Thus far it had afforded a fair living for his loved ones, and also enabled him to lay something by, and he trusted a year or two longer there would make him independent, perhaps a rich man.

Kathleen hated to see him go, but said that he must do as he deemed was best, and her father said the same.

The miner also urged that in The Frying Pan, Devil's Den and other interests she held in the mines, Ruth had quite a fortune that should not be sacrificed, and he would go back and settle up her affairs for her.

So it was decided that Deadshot Dean should return, and all began to look forward with regret to the day of his departure.

The day before the one set for his going a letter came addressed as follows:

"TO MISTER CARRULL DEAN,

"DEAD SHOT DEAN,

"Miner of Hangman's Gulch.

"At _____

"State of _____"

"I have a letter from Four-in-hand Frank, Ruth," cried the miner, and all laughed at the address.

"Read it, brother Carrol, for I know it is rare reading," Ruth said.

Then she added, while a sad smile crossed her face:

"I am anxious to hear the news in Yellow Dust Valley."

Opening the letter, which was written in a very remarkable manner, for Four-in-hand Frank handled the reins far better than he wrote, the miner read about as follows:

"AT FRYING PAN HOT-EL,

"On a Sunday.

"DEAR PARD DEAD SHOT DEAN:—

"I takes my pen in hand and sits down to communicate to you a few tidings which has tuk place since your going from these parts.

"As Bonnie Belle was a-going ter your home, I s'pose she have seen yer and told yer how my coach were held up and she were robbed of all her money and jewels, so I won't write about that, seein' as it's not easy for me ter drive a pen as it is ter handle six critturs o' ther trail by night.

"Soon arter the hold up o' my coach, Buffalo Bill come a-nosing along ther trails and stayed a few days in Pocket City.

"Some o' his old foes jumped him fer a tenderfoot and started in ter make wof meat of him, and ther result were that thar was a couple o' funerals up in Sunset Rest graveyard next day, for Bill he seen ther leetle game t-r kill him and so played his sixes ter win, and he won.

"Then thar come ther Surgeon Scout in a hurry from ther fort and Bill tuk off with him mighty quick.

"Next day I come across them on ther trail, and I parnt that poor Sandy's coach hed been held up by a masked road-agent."

"Sandy had tri d ter push by and had been kilt, shot through the head, and his passengers was then robbed of all they had, ther horses of the coach shot, and ther masked gent went on his way.

"Two days arter news come in to the station thet this same masked road-agent had held up Horseshoe Ned and got a box of valuable plunder he was carrying through to ther fort to Colonel Dunwoody.

"This last scare has jist got all who travel ther trails pretty badly frightened, and I is looking for ther masked man ter hold me up ag'in, or ter put a bullet inter me.

"When yer comes West, come light, and tell Bonnie Belle not to bring no money and diamonds with her.

"Se tt King paid her order on him O. K. and business in Ther Frying Pan and Devil's Den have been only fair, not booming as when Bonnie Belle is here, for she is the drawing keerd, and t'other saloons is picking up what she loses.

"But let me tell yer thet news hev jist come in thet Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill went through as passengers on Horseshoe Ned's hearse, and was held up, when they opened fire, and a bullet cut ther mask from ther face o' ther road-agent and Ned swears it were no other than Silk Lasso Sam, who hev let his beard grow out so as ter help disguise him.

"But if he be, then he have grown awful fat since I seen him last, and some how I don't believe it is him.

"Waal, I has about writ out, and so I must say give my love to Bonnie Belle, and your folks, and come back soon, for I hates ter see yer cabin all closed up.

"Nothing more at present from

"Your true pard.

"FOUR-IN-HAND FRANK,

"Of the Overland."

The miner glanced at Bonnie Belle as he finished reading the letter and catching his eye she said earnestly:

"You must find out the truth for me and let me know as soon as you return; but remember, I must know only the truth, whether it be Arden or not."

"I will tell you the truth," was the miner's promise.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MINER'S RETURN.

"It's Deadshot Dean, as I'm a sinner!"

The speaker was Four-in-hand Frank, and he sprung forward and grasped the hand of Carrol Dean, who had just alighted at the station from the incoming coach from the east.

From there Four-in-hand Frank was to take his coach westward to Pocket City, though the start was not to be made until the travelers had had breakfast.

It was just sunrise, and, tired and hungry, Deadshot Dean hastened in to get the best breakfast the station-master could set before his guests, and he was particularly urged to please the miner, as Four-in-hand Frank said:

"Sarve this gent up a square meal, and ther best ther lay-out kin git, or I begins ter shoot permiscuous-like all around."

As soon as breakfast was over Deadshot Dean, whose baggage had been transferred to Frank's coach, mounted the box with his driver friend.

There were no other passengers, so Frank sent his team away at a brisk trot, while the first question he asked was:

"Did yer git my communication?"

"I did, Frank, and thank you for it."

"Has yer seen Bonnie Belle?"

"I have, for I left her only three weeks ago."

"Why didn't she come along back with you?"

"To be candid with you, Frank, she is not coming back."

"Not coming back?"

"Oh, Lord!"

"No, she has decided to remain East, and I have all legal authority from her to sell out her interests in Pocket City."

"Deadshot?"

"Yes, Frank."

"I'd a' rather been shot then hev yer tell me Bonnie Belle hain't a-coming back, for I loves that gal, I does, with all my soul, and I hain't ashamed ter tell it."

"Yes, Frank, but you know that Bonnie Belle was out of place in this wild land, and when she went back to her old home, she realized that her duty lay in remaining there."

"She came West for a purpose, to do good, and having accomplished it, as she believed, she decided to remain away."

"Waal, that is true as gospel, and I wishes her luck through life."

"I am no more fit to love her then I is ter preach, for I has no eddication and is a hard cuss generally."

"But we can't help which way our hearts leads us, Deadshot, and so I got dead gone on thet pretty gal."

"I is glad she hain't a-comin' back, for I c'u'd never hev made her happy."

"That is the way to look at it, Frank."

"Yes, that's so."

"Now tell me how yer left yer folks?"

"Well, and they sent kind remembrances to my pard Four-in-hand Frank, as did also Bonnie Belle, who also gave me a present or two for you."

"A present?"

"Yes, they are in my luggage and when we halt I will give them to you."

"I'll halt only too quick, pard," and Frank drew rein.

Opening a large bundle well wrapped up, Deadshot Dean drew out a whip with a long handle and lash.

The handle screwed together, and was gold-mounted, while it was long enough to reach the leaders of the six-in-hand team.

Upon the handle was engraved:

"To

FOUR-IN-HAND FRANK

OF

The Overland Trail,

FROM

HIS GIRL PARD

BONNIE BELLE."

The yell of delight which the driver gave frightened the birds in the forest a quarter of a mile away, and the six horses got a taste of the lash in short order.

"It's the best I ever seen, Deadshot."

"And my wife sent you these, Frank," and a

pair of fine buckskin gloves were produced with the name of the driver embroidered upon the gauntlets.

"My father-in-law sent you this rubber coat, Frank, while my little boy, Kit, told me to give you this Mexican blanket to throw over your knees in cold weather, so you see all remembered you."

Into the large blue eyes of the honest driver came teardrops, and he faltered in a voice that quivered:

"I doesn't deserve it all, Deadshot."

"Yes you do, for you have always been a true friend to me, Frank, and many a little kindness do I owe to you."

"But now tell me the news?"

Four-in-hand Frank had first to try his treasures, so drew on his rubber coat, then spread the blanket over his knees, next put on his gloves and seizing his whip sent his horses along, while he cracked it loudly, causing the rocks to send back echoes like pistol-shots.

"All is prime fu'st-class, Deadshot, and I thanks you over and over again."

"Now I'll jist lay 'em aside and we'll hev a talk, for I suppose yer wishes ter hear ther cews."

"Yes, Frank, I would like to know what has happened since you wrote your letter to me?"

"Waal, it's believed ther masked road-agent hev got out o' ther country, fer he hev not been seen since he were shot at by Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell."

"Might he not have been wounded and have gone off somewhere to die?"

"It might be, but they could not find his trail, though they got his horse."

"And is it believed that it was Silk Lasso Sam?"

"Yes, they knows it war, for the capture of his horse proved that," answered the driver, and as the words left his lips, sharp, clear and stern came the command:

"Halt that coach, and hands up both of you!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RECOGNITION.

By a strange oversight, Deadshot Dean had not taken his belt of arms from his baggage and buckled them on, though in a land where they might be needed at any instant.

He had been of late where to go armed was considered cowardly as well as being against the law also, so that he had gotten out of using them.

The driver had his weapons on, however, but only in rare cases was an Overland driver expected to use them, as, traveling the trails as they did, liable to be held up at any time, they were, as though by the courtesy of the outlaws, almost invariably spared.

In fact the drivers of the coaches were looked upon by the outlaws as the ones who brought them their riches and hence were spared in many instances.

It was very evident that Four-in-hand Frank had been taken completely by surprise by this sudden command to halt, and the miner also seemed taken aback as they were just discussing the probable death from being wounded, of the masked outlaw.

Now he suddenly dashed out before them, his rifle leveled and the muzzle covering the heart of the driver.

Four-in-hand Frank put his foot upon the brake and drew rein with great alacrity, for the horseman was none other than the man whom he had hoped was dead; it was the masked outlaw and no mistake.

His mask covered his face completely, a long beard was visible below it, his hair was worn long, and his hands were gloved, while his form was tall and heavily built.

"If that is Silk Lasso Sam then he has greatly changed," was the thought which flashed through the mind of the miner, who finding himself so cleverly entrapped took the situation with remarkable coolness.

"Up with your hands, too, Deadshot Dean!" cried the masked outlaw, as he saw that the miner had not obeyed his command given when he halted the coach.

"Suppose I refuse?" was the cool query of the miner.

"Then I shall kill you."

"Bad as you are I do not believe that you would deliberately kill an unarmed man."

"Are you unarmed?" was the outlaw's question.

"Wholly."

"I do not believe you."

"You can see for yourself, for I have not buckled on my belt of arms, as I just came from the East, from Eden Valley, your old home, Arden."

The words had been uttered at random, but the eyes of the miner were upon the masked outlaw to note the result.

And watching as he did he saw a start of the outlaw, and then followed the words:

"What nonsense is this about having been to my old home?"

"It is not nonsense, for I penetrate your disguise, as I know that your beard beneath

that mask is false, that your hair is a wig, and that you are padded to make you appear stout."

The outlaw moved uneasily, and yet laughed at the words of the miner, while he said:

"It is false, Carrol Dean."

"Then how do you know my name?"

"I have often heard it."

"Where?"

"In the mines."

"That is false, for there I am known only as Deadshot Dean."

"I know you and that is enough; but come, I will stand no nonsense, so tell me what valuables you have with you?"

"Very little, as I brought no money back with me, for I did not have the faith in your pledges that one other did, so feared I might be held up on the way by the masked outlaw, whom I recognize as Silk Lasso Sam."

"I am not Silk Lasso Sam."

"Then why do you carry his silk lasso at your saddle-horn?"

There, hanging from the saddle-horn, was the handsome red-silk lasso of the outlaw chief.

"I captured that," he said, in an embarrassed way.

"You did?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you not care to hear from home, from the woman you once loved, now my wife, and the one who still is so devoted to you?"

"I do not know what you are talking about, Deadshot Dean."

"Well, I recognize you, and I tell you frankly that you will have a man upon your track who will never rest until he places the rope about your neck."

"Who is that man?"

"Buffalo Bill."

"Bah! a threatened man is long lived, and besides Buffalo Bill has been upon my track the past six weeks, and cannot find me."

"He will do so yet, and if he does not another will."

"Who, yourself?"

"Well, I have cause to hunt you down, as you know, but for the sake of one other I would be merciful."

"And who is this that will not be, other than Buffalo Bill?"

"The Surgeon Scout."

"Yes, a dangerous man, I admit, but I fear no man, as my actions show."

"It is a long lane that has no turn in it, Arden."

"Why do you call me by that name?"

"Because I know you."

"You just said I was Silk Lasso Sam."

"As you are, on this frontier, while in the long-ago you were known by the other name."

"You are mistaken; but come, I am tired of this long talk."

"Had you not been he whom I say you are you would have held no conversation with me."

"Come, I want gold, not talk, so out with what you have."

"It is a mere pittance, but here it is," and the miner tossed his pocketbook to the road-agent, who said:

"Thank you."

"Now, Four-in-hand Frank, what have you along of value?"

"Nothing."

"Then I must be content with what I have; so drive on."

Frank needed no second command, and as the coach rolled on once more the miner said:

"Yes, that is Silk Lasso Sam."

CHAPTER XX.

THE WELCOME.

"WAAL, Pard Deadshot, that were ther gamest talk yer give thet masked outlaw I ever heerd."

"Durned ef yer didn't seem ter back him right down," said Four-in-hand Frank, as the coach got well away from where they had left the masked outlaw standing in the trail.

"I was trying to see if he was really Silk Lasso Sam or not."

"And yer has decided?"

"I have."

"Which way?"

"That he is."

"Waal, yer seemed ter read him like a book; but how much did he git away from you?"

"Only about twenty dollars."

"You was in luck; but ther pocketbook seemd fat to me."

"It had a letter in it."

"And he got ther letter?"

"Yes."

"What a pity."

"Nol for it was intended for him."

"I don't quite catch on."

"Well, there was a letter in there which I wanted him to read, and if he does then he will doubtless be led into a trap, and that is what I was after."

"But do not speak of this to any one, Frank."

"I'll keep dark, you bet," was the answer, and then Frank continued:

"Now I is in great luck, for I expected to see my whip and t'other things go, and I has aboard a thousand in bills I got gold-dust exchanged for, which Scott King got me ter fetch back for him, and so the outlaw missed that."

"You were fortunate."

"It were all owing to ther talk yer give him, Pard Deadshot."

"But my! won't ther boys be glad ter see yer back ag'in, though they'll feel awful bad at ther news yer brings."

"That Bonnie Belle will not return?"

"Yes, pard."

"For her sake I am glad that she will not, though she did a great deal of good in the mines, and ruled the wild spirits there in a wonderful way."

"So she did, for her word were law."

As the day drew near its close they came to the cabin home of Deadshot Dean, situated upon the mountain spur.

"I'll stop and leave my traps there, Frank, and then go on to the camp with you."

"It does not look as though any one had been to my cabin since I left."

"You remember Tom and Jerry, don't yer?"

"Yes, two very hard citizens, as I remember them."

"Waal, they paid yer a visit, and they was a knockin' ter git in with a ax, when Buffalo Bill happened along and invited 'em ter take a walk with him up ter Pocket City."

"He were thet polite they c'u'dn't refuse, so he gave 'em over to ther Vigilantes and they was tried thet same night and made two more gallows fruit for Hangman's Gulch, don't yer see?"

"Yes, I can understand that the Vigilantes made quick work of them."

"Waal, now they did, pard, and I hasn't heerd o' no more visitors to your cabin since."

"I should think not," and the miner unlocked his door, and in a secret way raised a bar on the inside so that he could enter with his traps.

He gazed about him for a minute, as though overwhelmed by a flood of memories, and then with a sigh locked his door again and returning to the coach mounted and drove on once more with Four-in-hand Frank.

When the coach dashed up to the door of The Frying Pan, Scott King, the Vigilante Captain, was there to receive any passengers, and he welcomed the miner with a yell of delight.

The shout was taken up by others, and as the news spread that Deadshot Dean had returned the greeting that he received on all sides proved that he had many friends in Pocket City.

Of course the first questions asked were about Bonnie Belle, and when the miner made known that the Idol of Yellow Dust Valley was not to return, that she had decided to remain in her home in the East, a shadow fell upon all, and Deadshot Dean had to tell over and over again that it was from no cause of ill treatment in Pocket City that she remained away, but for the reason that her friends there insisted that she should give up forever the wild life she had led upon the frontier.

"We gits drunk this night from sorrow," said a miner, and his sentiments were echoed by scores of others, who at once proceeded to carry out their intention to drown their grief at Bonnie Belle's not returning, in the intoxicating bowl.

The result was that the camps were very soon in the wildest of orgies, and yelling, profanity, gambling, drinking and fighting ran high.

Maddened with drink, the men at last began to get into a very ugly mood toward the one who had brought them the news of Bonnie Belle's determination to remain away from Pocket City, and it needed but a spark to turn them like hungry wolves against the miner.

That spark was soon supplied by one who hated Deadshot Dean, and who was glad to vent his hatred upon him through others.

"I tell yer, pards, I doesn't believe he's squar'."

"Bonnie Belle went East under his care, and now he comes back here and tells us she hain't a-comin' home ag'in, while he says he brings papers fer him ter settle up her business, and all thet."

"I say, pards, maybe he hes kilt Bonnie Belle ter git her gold, and I fer one say thet he sh'u'd hang."

A wild chorus of those of the same opinion greeted this suggestion, and five minutes after a hundred rum-maddened desperadoes were upon their way to the cabin of Deadshot Dean to wreak vengeance upon him.

CHAPTER XXI.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

DEADSHOT DEAN had held a long conversation with Scott King, in whose hands Bonnie Belle had left the management of her affairs during her absence.

"I tell you, Deadshot, the business pays dead sure, only it is not what it was when Bonnie Belle was here."

"The fact is the girl was a magnet and drew the boys, while half of them were in love with her."

"Many of them boarded at The Frying Pan just to catch a glimpse daily of her sweet face,

and of course it was the same way with the Devil's Den, men went there to play only to see her.

"I have heaped up money, it is true, and have got a snug sum to turn over to you in cash, above all expenses, only if Bonnie Belle had been here it would have been just three times the amount."

So had said Scott King, and the miner saw for himself that he told the truth.

Neither The Frying Pan or the Devil's Den were what they had been under the management of Bonnie Belle in person.

"I'll see you as soon as I get settled, Scott, and we'll talk it all over," the miner had said, and then, tried with his long journey he had gone to his cabin to go to bed.

But before retiring he had arranged all in order, unpacked the luggage he had brought with him, and among which were many contributions from Bonnie Belle and Kathleen to make him more comfortable.

Then, too, the artist had given him a painting of the little cottage home, with the familiar faces of those who dwelt there visible upon the piazza.

This was hung in a prominent place, a new repeating rifle was loaded and placed within reach, his ammunition was stored closed at hand, his new cooking utensils set upon the hearth and the provisions stored in the cupboard.

At last, after midnight, and utterly worn out he threw himself upon his bed to rest, and at once sunk into a deep slumber.

A loud rap at the door answered him.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Friends, pard, ter see yer on business."

Fortunately for the miner he recognized the voice of one who was the man he had most cause to fear in the mines, for he was a secret foe.

He was known as Cast Iron Bill, and was a giant in strength, a desperate hand with a knife and a crack shot.

He had been the friend of Powder Face Pete, and was often away from the mines.

When the outlaws had been captured, he claimed to be their prisoner, and after the trial had been released as there was no real proof against him.

He had drifted back to the mines and soon made himself a terror among the camps, having taken the name of Cast Iron Bill, shaved off his beard and cut his hair short, as though wishing to disguise himself among those who knew him but too well.

Deadshot Dean had seen him at The Frying Pan when he arrived, and in spite of the change in his appearance had recognized him, while he had caught the scowl that he gave him and overheard his words:

"That gerloot hain't back in Pocket City fer no good, pards."

Now he recognized the voice of the man and soon he thought he heard a certain suspicious sound like the shuffling of many feet and the low hum of many voices.

"All right, pard, wait a minute," he said, and quickly he stepped upon a chest, turned a slide and looked through a peep-hole in the logs.

What he saw were a hundred silent men, evidently there for no good.

Quickly he took down his new repeating rifle, buckled on his belt of arms, and asked calmly, as he stood one side of the door:

"Who are you, pard?"

"A friend o' yours, who has something to tell you."

"How many are with you?"

"I'm all alone."

"What do you wish to see me about?"

"A leetle matter o' business which I'll tell you about when you opens the door."

"Cast Iron Bill, I know you for as great a scoundrel as there is in the Yellow Dust Valley, and I shall not open the door."

"That's flat-footed enough, for sure, but we'll break it in."

"Touch the door to break it in and I shall open fire."

"We kin fire, too, Deadshot, and thar is men here who can shoot as good as you kin."

"Say, men, what means this demonstration against me?" called out the miner.

Cast Iron Bill responded:

"It means that we believe you have kilt Bonnie Belle to git her money, and now has come back here to rob her of it."

"That charge is in keeping with your devilish character, Cast Iron Bill, and I warn you that I am well armed, well fortified and shall defend my life against you and your ruffian gang," and the voice of Deadshot Dean rung out like a trumpet and was heard by ever man outside the cabin.

CHAPTER XXII.

BUFFALO BILL AND HIS BACKERS.

A SILENCE followed the ringing words of Deadshot Dean, and then came muffled voices, and the loud command of Cast Iron Bill:

"Pards, let him hear ther guns, and he won't talk so game."

At once there followed a deafening roar of shots, for every man fired one or more bullets into the stout door.

But the door was built of three inch slabs grooved together and iron-clamped, and not a bullet passed through the hardened oak into the cabin.

Hardly had the sound of firing died away when, suddenly, from the roof of the cabin rung out in rapid succession shot after shot, and the crowd, with cries of terror rushed close for shelter from the deadly aim of the dauntless miner.

His fusillade was answered and the bullets rattled upon the roof like rain.

The shots of the Deadshot had not been thrown away, for two men had been killed and three wounded.

This, of course, infuriated the assailants only the more, and Cast Iron Bill's voice was heard ordering:

"Burn the wolf out of his den, men! Quick, pile up this wood and set it on fire!"

A wild cheer answered this command, and the pile of wood the miner had gathered for use was hurriedly thrown against the door, with papers, hay and all things that would ignite easily which could be gathered close at hand.

"Now, light the fire, pards!" yelled Cast Iron Bill, and a flame was visible at once, while the crowd yelled like Modocs on the war charge.

But, suddenly, there came an answering yell, and in the rear!—a yell which many of those men had heard, and which was wont to spread terror wherever heard.

It was an outburst that always struck upon the ear of the red-skin with horror, and was wont to send the outlaw flying for his life from a scene where he was caught in the deviltry of his calling or in his long tramps on the fastnesses of the hills.

It was the wild war-cry of the scouts of the plains—of Buffalo Bill and his merry men!

They were coming like an avalanche up the hill, straight for the scene, and advanced with revolvers in each hand ready to enforce the menace of their terrible war-cry.

The jubilation of the desperadoes was turned in an instant to alarm, while at once Cast Iron Bill uttered the warning:

"It's Buffalo Bill and his buckskins! It is fight, or run sure, pards! Which shall it be, men?"

"Fight!" came a yell from several, while others skurried for shelter behind the cabin.

A moment more and the crowd of sixteen horsemen were brought to a halt before the cabin, thirty-two revolvers were leveled, each holding six deadshots, while Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell headed the Buckskin Cavalcade!

Surgeon Powell was the spokesman, for though chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill yielded to his friend's rank as an officer.

"What means this attack upon the cabin of Deadshot Dean?" cried the Surgeon Scout.

A silence fell upon the crowd of desperadoes, though the hand of every man was upon his "shooter."

There upon the ground visible and most distinctly in the moonlight, lay the dead forms of two of the outlaw gang, and the three who had been wounded, proving that there had already been hot work going on there.

The crowd were in an ugly mood, they now had arisen to the fighting point, against the intruding scouts, and they were now determined to capture and hang Deadshot Dean, to revenge their comrades.

The scouts were but sixteen, and easily counted, while the outlaws were over a hundred in number, and had the advantage of position.

Why should they be interfered with by the buckskin riders?

They saw no reason and their mood became more ugly.

"It means that Deadshot Dean has murdered poor Bonnie Belle, and have come back here ter steal her belongings, that's what it means," answered Cast Iron Bill doggedly.

"You are an infamous liar, sir, to make such an assertion against Deadshot Dean, for I know that Bonnie Belle is alive and well, and that she has authorized the miner Dean to settle up her business here for her," responded the Surgeon Scout.

"Waal, we knows our business, and we intends ter burn him out and then hang him in Hangman's Gulch, and if you and Buffalo Bill chips in we'll just wipe you out too."

"This is your decision then?" sternly asked the Surgeon Scout.

Before Cast Iron Bill could answer there came from within the cabin the voice of the miner:

"Ho, Surgeon Powell, these men are in desperate mood, and I would urge that you do not get into a conflict with them upon my account, for though it may not look so, I am well able to take care of myself."

"You are a brave fellow, Dean, and we will not desert you, but defend you, and again I warn these men off, and I do so as an officer of the army," and the voice of the Surgeon Scout was full of determination to stand his ground.

But Cast Iron Bill called out:

"Pards, stand yer ground, for we holds ther fort, and thar won't be a scout left ef they makes ther bad break o' firin' on us."

A silence then followed for a few seconds, and it was broken by Buffalo Bill, who said, address-

ing the Surgeon Scout, but in tones that all heard:

"I believe, sir, these fools are going to resist us, so would it not be well to give the signal for Captain Caruth and his troops?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SCOUT'S PROOF.

THE words of Buffalo Bill reached every ear, and instantly there was a movement of uneasiness seen in the crowd.

Sixteen horsemen might be no match for over a hundred desperate men, even though led by Surgeon Powell and the chief of scouts Buffalo Bill, with Texas Jack and other former plainsmen in the background.

But the fame of Captain Dick Caruth was well known in the mines, and he was known to have deserved the name of Dashing Dick, the Dragoon.

It was recalled that he had offered his troop once as a sacrifice for the army, and had held in check thousands of warriors until reinforcements came and he had saved the day.

With his troop camped within hail the desperadoes knew how quickly their weakness would be revealed.

They now felt that the scouts had been encamped down in the canyon, not a quarter of a mile from Deadshot Dean's cabin, and had come at the first sound of firing.

Surgeon Powell was known to be the surgeon of the cavalry regiment to which Dashing Dick Caruth's troop belonged, and had come, as was his wont, with the scouts to the rescue.

The miner's cabin was upon a spur, under a cliff, and upon one.

There was but a single approach, up a steep path from the stage trail winding around the base of the mountain a few hundred yards below, and the scouts had come this way and so cut off the retreat of the desperadoes.

They could rush along the ridge to Hangman's Gulch, but not a man cared to go near that weird place of terrible, haunting memories.

The troop, if signaled, would come directly along the valley to the steep path and cut them off, and if Dick Caruth was called upon to quell a mob he knew that the best way to do so was to wipe them out, and he would do it.

So it was that the men pondered, and eagerly watched for the signal to be given which would call in Dick Caruth and his wild riders.

The desperadoes turned their gaze upon their leader, Cast Iron Bill.

He moved uneasily and began to feel that he had made a mistake.

He saw that Buffalo Bill had his eye upon him, and he stepped back as the scout dismounted and approached him.

It was a desperate thing for Buffalo Bill to do, but then he was a man to take desperate steps when needed, and this very boldness won in nine cases out of ten for him.

"See here, pard; you are Bill Sykes, are you not?" said the scout facing the ringleader and all were silent as death awaiting reply.

"I is known here as Cast Iron Bill!" was the dogged response.

"Oh, you are, are you?"

"I is that, an no mistake!"

"Under most circumstances I would feel that I was mistaken, and offer an apology, but now let me tell you that you were one of Silk Lasso Sam's gang."

"It's a lie!"

"You were the man who got off by pretending to be the prisoner of Silk Lasso Sam, and though many believed you, I doubted you; in fact I felt so sure that you were really an outlaw that I was determined to know you the next time I saw you."

"Yer don't know me, though, for I hain't ther man that you mean."

"Oh, yes you are; for, though you have chopped off your long locks, and mowed your whiskers, to try and look innocent, I recognize you as a man who should have been hanged with the other ruffians some weeks ago."

"I tells yer I hain't ther man, Buffalo Bill," shouted the ringleader of the now menacing desperadoes.

"And I say that you are the man."

"Boys, does yer bear him insulting me?" cried Cast Iron Bill, anxious to create a movement in his favor, which would allow him to escape from the piercing eyes of the scout.

"We does!" came in a roar, and at the sullen, threatening chorus, Surgeon Powell raised a small silver bugle to his lips, but gave forth no sound.

The crowd moved uneasily at this, for they knew that meant a call upon the troopers of Dick Caruth.

Then every eye was centered upon Buffalo Bill, and the hearts of the Buckskin Scouts were "in their throats," choking them in the moments of terrible suspense they were enduring at the daring action of their chief.

As for the Surgeon Scout he sat upon his horse as serene as the moonlight that streamed down upon them, his bugle held to his lips with his left hand, his revolver in his right, facing the desperate crowd gathered before Deadshot Dean's cabin: sat watching, with eagle eyes,

Buffalo Bill as he confronted the leader of the desperadoes.

"You say that you are not the man I accuse you of being, but I have the proof that you are," said Buffalo Bill.

"Show yer proof!" shouted Cast Iron Bill.

Instantly his right wrist was grasped by Buffalo Bill; when, pointing with his revolver held in his left hand, at the back of Cast Iron Bill's hand, where was visible as a red scar the two letters:

"B. B."

the scout shouted:

"There is my proof—my red brand upon your hand! You are the man I accuse you of being."

The revolver of Cast Iron Bill had dropped from his hand under the crushing grip of Buffalo Bill, and the scout now held him covered, while the crowd swayed wildly and it looked as though a conflict was inevitable.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STAMPEDE.

At the very second when all felt that a conflict must come—that the desperadoes realized that they must wipe out the scouts or be wiped out, and the Buckskins felt that the inevitable was upon them, the Surgeon Scout saved the bloodshed which another moment would have precipitated, for loud ringing and appealing rung out the notes of the bugle now pressed to his lips, calling Dashing Dick Caruth and his troopers to the rescue.

The effect was electrical. A wild cry of apprehension broke from the desperadoes, and, almost as one man they turned and stampeded in a desperate rush along the ridge leading to Hangman's Gulch.

In this mad rush Buffalo Bill was swept apart from the leader of the outlaw horde, and borne along for some yards before he could extricate himself from the fleeing mass of now thoroughly terrified humanity.

Not a shot was fired, not a shout was heard, after that first cry of alarm following the bugle-notes.

The chief of scouts freeing himself from the crowd, turned and glanced toward his men in buckskin.

They sat upon their horses, clutching their revolvers, silent as specters, and awaiting the word to charge upon that flying crowd.

But, they waited in vain, for the word was not given by Buffalo Bill.

Turning to Surgeon Powell, they saw that his face was convulsed with laughter, and from his lips came the words:

"Look at them!"

"Oh! if I was only in Hangman's Gulch with a sheet around me, they certainly would run themselves to death."

The situation was, in truth, most ludicrous to the scouts, when suddenly the cabin door flew open and out sprang a white-robed form.

"Give me a chance now, and I'll keep them stampeded."

It was Deadshot Dean looking like a ghost, as he ran like a deer around the cliff and disappeared.

"He'll scare every mother's son of them to death, for he has gone by a short cut to the Gulch," cried Buffalo Bill.

The scouts laughed, and then became silent, as Surgeon Powell cried:

"Silence, all! and hearken for the climax!"

It was not long that they had to wait, for soon there were heard the wildest yells up toward Hangman's Gulch, and the trampling of feet in rapid flight also reached the ears of the listeners.

The scouts had dismounted, and were, some of them, rolling upon the ground in convulsions of laughter.

Surgeon Powell had gone up to the forms that lay silent upon the ground.

One of the wounded men had felt able to get up and stampede with his comrades; another had just breathed his last, and bending over the third, Surgeon Powell said:

"He is going fast, too. I can do nothing for him."

A moment after and he, too, slipped out of life, and just then the white-robed form of the miner was seen returning.

He threw off his sheet as he came, and, walking up to Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, grasped a hand of each, while he said, earnestly:

"I am more than glad to see you, gentlemen, and what I owe to you, and your brave comrades here, I fear I can never repay."

"Don't mention it, Pard Deadshot, for we were mighty glad to be near," Buffalo Bill replied, feelingly.

"Yes, we visited your cabin just after dark and not finding you, we camped in the canyon, where we had camped before. Then we heard the firing and came to your rescue of course," Surgeon Powell added.

"And where are the troopers?" asked the miner.

"What troopers?"

"Captain Caruth and his men, sir."

"They are at the fort."

"I thought they were near."

"Oh, that was a clever ruse of Buffalo Bill's—to make those fellows think we had aid near, and I blew the call when I saw that there was going to be trouble."

"It stampeded the gang very quickly, Surgeon Powell."

"Oh, yes, and if I mistake not you added to their speed in the Hangman's Gulch."

The miner laughed and replied:

"I simply showed myself near the graves of the men who have been hanged there and ran upon the gallows which you know stands there, and which, let me add, I might have been forced to step off of into eternity but for your coming to-night."

"The effect was wonderful, for those fellows were sure that they saw the ghost of a man who had been hanged, and with yells of terror they went pell-mell through the gap toward the trail for Pocket City."

"I never ran so many men in my life before."

"But what is this story they told about your murdering Bonnie Belle?"

"It is all nonsense, originating with my foes, and I suppose fermented by bad liquor into a determination to hang me."

"Then you will not remain in Pocket City longer, Mr. Dean?"

"Oh, yes, I have come here to complete certain work for myself and Bonnie Belle, and those men shall not drive me away."

"But let me see to these dead men now," and the miner turned to those who had fallen by his hand.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONVINCED.

THE dead bodies of the men who had fallen under the fire of Deadshot Dean, were laid at one side of the cabin, and covered over with a blanket, and the scouts returned to the camp, excepting Doctor Powell and Buffalo Bill, who accepted the invitation of the miner to pass the remainder of the night with him.

The next morning they were up bright and early, and having breakfasted sat down to talk over matters.

"Colonel Dunwoody had a letter from Bonnie Belle, in which she said that she had decided to remain East, and that you would look after her affairs here, and asked, as you might have trouble with the miners, to kindly lend you what aid he could."

"It was very kind of her, and I did not know that she had written," the miner said.

"The colonel called me into his confidence, and I volunteered to come down here and see if you had arrived."

"Buffalo Bill and his men were scouting on the stage trail to Pocket City, to see if any clew could be found to the masked road-agent that has been seen lately on the Overland Trails, and I came across them last evening and they came on here with me to find you."

"Finding your cabin closed we went into camp in the canyon, and I am glad that we did, indeed."

"Yes, it was fortunate for me that you did so, gentlemen."

"But I arrived by Four-in-hand Frank's coach last night and went on direct to Pocket City."

"I made known the fact that Bonnie Belle was not to return and that I was to arrange her affairs there, and I supposed all would be peaceable, though I did see a few scowling at me and heard some doubts cast upon my story."

"It doubtless grew into an indignation meeting under the influence of rum and they came here accusing me of the murder of Bonnie Belle and of returning to Pocket City to get her property."

"That shows what rum will do," said Buffalo Bill with a serious expression.

"Have you joined the Water Tanks, Bill?" asked Surgeon Powell.

"No, but I know better than to drink frontier rum, for two drinks of that would make a man throw stones at his grandmother."

"Well, Mr. Dean, I am glad to see you back again, and I shall take good care to let it be known in Pocket City that you are here under the protection of Colonel Dunwoody."

"Now as to these bodies?"

"Well, sir, if Buffalo Bill will let his scouts carry them to Pocket City, I will go ahead and explain the situation."

"And Cody and I will accompany you," said the Surgeon Scout.

"You are very kind; but may I ask if you came along the trail, Mr. Cody, after the coach?"

"We did, sir."

"And saw no trace of it being held up?"

"Ah! were you held up?" quickly asked Buffalo Bill.

"Yes."

"When was this?"

"An hour after leaving the station."

"And we turned into the trail this side of the station some twelve miles, and a couple of hours after the coach had passed, but rode rapidly on after you."

"I am sorry you were not near when we were held up."

"Who was the man that halted you?"

"A masked horseman, the same, Four-in-hand Frank told me, who held him up when Bonnie Belle was going East and robbed her."

"A man on a large blood-bay horse?"

"Yes."

"A stout man and masked?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who we think that man is?"

"I know who he is."

"Ah! and will tell us?"

"Yes, though I think it had better be kept quiet for the present that we suspect him."

"It is Silk Lasso Sam."

"It certainly is."

"And yet the man is said to weigh sixty to seventy pounds heavier than Silk Lasso Sam."

"That flesh is manufactured with pace, or extra clothing."

"Exactly the opinions of Surgeon Powell and myself," Buffalo Bill remarked.

"Well, Mr. Cody, the man held up the coach and I had quite a talk with him."

"He knew me, and I led him on that I might study the tones of his voice and actions."

"At last I felt that there was no mistake, that Silk Lasso Sam had broken every pledge made to his noble sister and once more gone back to outlawry on the road."

"Yes, and next time he is captured there will be nothing that will save him, for that noble girl is not here now."

"Mr. Cody, let me urge that if you, Surgeon Powell or your men, get the chance, kill Silk Lasso Sam, do not make him a prisoner."

"You have some good motive for this request, Mr. Dean," the Surgeon Scout said.

"I have."

"You will tell us?"

"Yes, for I am convinced beyond all doubt that this masked highwayman is Silk Lasso Sam."

"If he is killed, his career is ended, but if captured, I know his sister well enough to be certain that she will at once come here to rescue him," said the miner impressively.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MINER'S PLAN.

THE remark of the miner, regarding Bonnie Belle, was a surprise to both the surgeon and the scout.

They did not believe that the devoted sister would again attempt the rescue of the man who had so betrayed every trust placed in him.

"Do you really believe that she would not leave him to his fate, if he was captured again at his lawless deeds?" asked Frank Powell.

"Let me tell you, gentlemen, that Ruth Leigh is made of no ordinary material."

"She learned to love her brother with all her soul, and his escapades of youth he so tinged with romance, that she regarded him as a hero."

"At last her eyes were opened to his evil heart, and yet though she censured and pitied she yet could not banish her love for him."

"Her nature is to love once, love forever, unless that love should turn to hatred and then she would hate as intensely as she had loved."

"She is a very remarkable girl, and never had any companions and friendships beyond her father, mother and brother."

"Her parents passing away, all of her affection became centered upon her unworthy brother, and she sought to find good in him, to force him out of his evil life."

"She came here to find him, and doing so, she sought to save him from himself, from the gallows."

"You know how he acted toward her, and when she offered to share her fortune with him he preferred robbery and murder to get his gold."

"He was captured, and she had decided to give him up."

"Then came his appealing letter, his pledge of reformation, and you know the clever part she played to rescue him, and how well she did it."

"Believing in him she went East, and yet, if she knew that he was a prisoner she would come here at once, and plan as we might to hold him, she would successfully plot to rescue him."

"That is why I say to you to kill him, not to make him a prisoner."

"That is just my view of it, and I have told Cody that such a fate would meet the views of Colonel Dunwoody better than to have to hang the villain, much as he deserves it."

"But what a remarkable misfortune that such a woman as is Miss Leigh should have such a brother."

"It was one of those strange things in life we cannot account for, doctor."

"Now, tell me, Mr. Dean, if this man robbed you of anything valuable?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Only a few dollars which I had put as a bait into an old pocketbook I intended he should take if he met us on the way."

"I do not exactly understand."

"Well, Buffalo Bill, I decided to try and get rid of this man, and for his sweet sister's sake."

"So I wrote him a letter, folded it into a small compass and placed it in my old pocketbook, with a few dollars and slips of papers."

"You may not be aware that this man, Arden Leigh, was my rival for the hand of my wife."

"When she chose between us, honoring me, he drew a revolver and very nearly caused my death wound."

"That act, and forging his father's name, and receiving by it a large sum of money, caused his flight."

"Of course he knows that I knew his sister as Bonnie Belle, and that she had gone East to her home."

"When, therefore, he received in my pocketbook this letter from me, telling him to come to my cabin to visit me, that I had tidings of importance for him, he will come."

"When he does I must stand ready to face him as man to man, and should I capture him alive, then I would see to it that the miners tried his case."

"Should I have to kill him, Ruth Leigh should never know that my hand took his life."

"When he demanded money of me, I threw him the pocketbook containing the letter, and it will not be long before I shall have a visit from him."

"You are a brave man, Deadshot Dean, and a powerful one, while your name indicates what you are with a revolver and the nerve you have; but you are too good a man to risk what you must singly with that man, unless it is a case where you are forced to do so."

"Yes, so I say too, Surgeon Powell, and I will just ask Mr. Dean to allow me to be his guest, to lie in hiding here in his cabin, and await for that visitor to come," Buffalo Bill remarked.

"Yes, both of us might remain," Frank Powell added.

"No indeed, I could not think of it after the letter I have written him."

"I could only feel that I was not acting a cowardly and treacherous part, even toward him, by meeting him as man to man, single-handed."

"If he betters me, then I must take the consequences, and I will without a murmur," was the response of the brave miner, and his words won the greater admiration of the Surgeon Scout and Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A LIVELY CORPSE.

It having been decided that the surgeon and the scout should go on with the miner to Pocket City, the scouts were called up and Texas Jack was told to follow with four men and the dead bodies of the slain, across horses of those who were to remain at Deadshot's cabin.

Mounting one of the scout's horses, the miner then rode on with his two comrades and they entered Pocket City riding side by side.

The news had of course gotten out, of the attack on the miner, but those who had been in it did not care to talk of the affair, and it was only known through those who had not joined the crowd, but had seen them depart.

Judge Scott King had heard of it only after breakfast, through Four-in-hand Frank, who had picked up the news by accident, and had gone at once to report it.

"If they have killed Deadshot Dean, then there shall be a weeding out of desperadoes in these mines that will make many a grave," the Vigilante captain had said.

"Waal, they has hanged him, for over a hundred of them went to his cabin ter hang him," was driver Frank's reply.

"Then over a hundred of them shall hang, for there are good men enough here to put down the bad ones."

"I will at once sound the tocsin calling my Vigilantes together, and then bring my jury together to try the scoundrels who have done this deed."

"If Bonnie Belle was here she'd make Rome howl," said the angry Vigilante captain, and there was an expression upon his face that went to show that if he had his way there should be some howling in Rome even if Bonnie Belle was not present.

The "tocsin" was an old gong which Landlord Lazarus had used at The Frying Pan before Bonnie Belle made the cornet serve as a substitute to call the miners to their meals.

It, the tocsin, had a roar on it like muffled thunder interlarded with peals and lightning strokes, and Scott King knew just how to get the most voice out of the thing.

He began with a mournful cadence that was soon sputtering out crashes of thunder, and when it reached the ears of every one in Yellow Dust Valley, no matter what he was doing, that man went on the jump for The Frying Pan.

The whole community were on the *qui vive*, anyhow, at the whisper going the rounds that Miner Deadshot Dean had been hanged by a crowd under cover of the night.

The men who had been in that fracas were afraid to go at the call of the tocsin, and yet they dared not stay away.

So they went, and Cast Iron Bill was alone

conspicuous by his absence, for he went up into the cemetery and viewed the scene with a spy-glass, having a saddle and bridled horse awaiting him over in the valley beyond.

The tocsin had given its ear-splitting summons just as the miner, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill rode into the camps.

"What in thunder does that mean?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I guess the Vigilante captain has just learned that I was hanged last night, and is calling the men together," assured the miner.

There had gathered a large crowd about The Frying Pan, and there stood Judge Scott King upon the piazza with Four-in-hand Frank by his side.

Back of him were gathered the "dignitaries" of the miners, that is, the men whose word had some weight in that wild community.

"Gentlemen," began Scott King, and those who knew that they were not gentlemen looked pleased at being caught in good company.

"It has just reached my knowledge, that a foulest of foul deeds was perpetrated last night in our midst, by a gang of ruffians all of a hundred strong."

"These ruffians, hating a man they feared, filled their skins with bad liquor—and let me here remark that they did not get it at the Devil's Den, for there only the best is sold—I say those ruffians filled their skins with liquor, gotten at low dives in our midst, and then went to the house of the noble citizen of whom I speak."

"They went there with rum-maddened brains, with murder in their hearts and a rope in their hands, determined to drag from his bed in the gloom of night the citizen whose name will soon be upon every man's lip coupled with just revenge, and with malice and cruelty did hang him until he was dead, upon the gallows in Hangman's Gulch, where only the basest of criminals are taken to end their guilty lives."

"Gentlemen, this news began in a whisper at first, and then ended in a thunder roar which has brought you together at my call, for justice to the dead is demanded, and as the judge of the court of Yellow Dust Valley I shall try those, be they a hundred in number, whom the Vigilantes, of whom I am captain, hunt down and bring to me as the guilty ones."

"Gentlemen, the man who was thus foully murdered was our esteemed fellow-citizen, Deadshot Dean, the miner of Hangman's Gulch, and, Vigilantes, I call upon you to do your duty and first find the corpse, then the murderers."

"There's the corpse, judge, and a lively one it be," called out a voice as the miner suddenly rode up with the Surgeon and Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A THREAT.

At the words of the man whose eyes had fallen upon the miner as he rode up, every one turned quickly and beheld Deadshot Dean and his two companions.

A cheer went up from the crowd, and then they all looked first at Judge Scott King, who had made his speech about avenging the death of the miner, and then at Deadshot, as though for an explanation.

The judge never allowed himself to be cornered, so said quickly:

"I'm glad to see you, Deadshot Dean, for news came to me that you had been taken from your cabin and hanged."

"Explain, please, what it means."

"I can only say, Judge King, that a band of over a hundred came to my cabin last night, drunk and with murderous intent."

"They were led by a desperado whom I fail to see in this crowd, but hope to meet again, as I have a score to settle with him."

"They sought to get into my cabin, and when I would not open my door, fired bullets into it and said that they had come to hang me for murdering Bonnie Belle and then coming here to rob her."

"It was of course only the work of men who sought to get rid of me, and they had prepared to set fire to my cabin when Surgeon Powell, and Buffalo Bill and his scouts came to my rescue."

"They were determined still to show fight until made aware that there was Captain Caruth's troop encamped within call, and when the signal was given for them by Surgeon Powell, the cowards fled like the pack of cowardly coyotes they are."

"In defending myself I killed and wounded some of the gang, and the bodies are now being brought here by Buffalo Bill's scouts."

"Is my report satisfactory, Judge King, for if not, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill are here to verify it?"

"Your report is perfectly satisfactory, Deadshot Dean, and that lawless men may understand that the law of right and justice is supreme here, you have only to point out to me any of the men whom you recognize as participants in this outrage, and they shall sleep the sleep that knows no waking in Hangman's Gulch to-night."

A wild yell of approval from the better element answered these words of the "judge," and

there was many a face blanched as Deadshot Dean's eyes rested upon it.

He allowed his eyes to linger a moment upon the faces of men who he knew were in the crowd, but, though he showed such that he knew them and held them in his power, wholly at his mercy, he did not pick out a single man, but said:

"I could name many to you, judge, but I am sure that they will not offend again, so I will not do so."

"It is your duty, Deadshot Dean, to name any man you know was there."

"I decline to do so, sir, other than in one instance, and I can not see him here in the crowd."

"You decline to name them?"

"I do, sir."

"This is wrong on your part."

"Some were sufferers, as they fell under my fire, and the others stampeded from the soldiers, so let that be their punishment, judge."

"As you wish, but I fear you are making a mistake in being merciful."

"I shall take the chances, Judge King."

"Very well, and let me now say for the benefit of all, that there are men in these mines who are playing too bold a hand, who do not even respect the military powers that be, and to such I give warning that they are doing that which will make Yellow Dust Valley and Pocket City a wilderness, for if there is a scout or a soldier killed here we may expect a force to sweep over us that will destroy us."

"Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, I bid you welcome, gentlemen."

The surgeon and the scout dismounted and returned the greeting of the judge most kindly, after which they went in with the miner to dinner and were entertained in the quarters of Bonnie Belle, for Deadshot Dean had the keys of the wing she had occupied.

Soon after the scouts came in with the bodies of the slain men, and all crowded around to see just who they were.

The judge was surprised to several among them whom he had not expected to find in such bad company.

But he gave orders for a grand funeral, and the miners remained on hand to attend it.

Up to Sunset Rest they filed, Deadshot Dean, to his great regret, feeling that it was his duty to attend the burial.

"It looks too much like a doctor attending the obsequies of his patients, for me to go," he whispered to Surgeon Powell who smiled at the conceit.

The whole town turned out, not so much from respect, as from a desire to be on hand and see all that was going on.

One of the miners read the funeral service, and it seemed to be expected that Deadshot Dean would make some remarks at the graves, but he disappointed all by remaining silent.

But the judge gave a discourse that was a regular funeral sermon for "frightful examples" of what the road to wickedness led.

As the miner, the surgeon and the scout rode back down the hill, they did not see a pair of fierce eyes glaring at them from a thicket, or hear the savage threat.

"There are three men that I must kill."

The man was Cast Iron Bill.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE THROW OF A DOLLAR.

THE man Cast Iron Bill had the look of one who was in trouble.

His face wore an anxious look, his mouth was set and his eyes roved restlessly in their sockets like one who was expecting momentarily to face a foe.

He saw the miner and his two comrades ride away from Sunset Hill.

Then he waited until nearly all of the crowd had followed them.

He was back in a position that commanded a view of the burying-ground, and down in the valley, hidden in a thicket, was his horse and his traps, for Cast Iron Bill had left his cabin with a view of taking a long trail out of that part of the country if necessary, to prevent his going upon the last long trail which could end only in the grave, his exit from life being made at the end of a rope.

The man stood pondering for some time, and then at last his face brightened as he said:

"I'll do it!"

After a moment he began to muse aloud:

"Let me see."

"I dare not remain in Pocket City, except with the sure prospect of trouble, for if Deadshot Dean does not dog my life, and I have every reason to believe that he will, then it will be Buffalo Bill, the Surgeon Scout, and perhaps the people, for they were turned dead against me at that meeting to-day, and this burial of the men goes against me."

"If I leave Pocket City I must take my life in my hands also, for I come out at once as an outlaw."

"The danger of staying or going is about equal, with big chances if I go that I will make plenty of money."

"My surest plan is to go and hunt up the masked road-agent."

"If it is the old chief, Silk Lasso Sam, then I am fixed, for he will be glad of a pard."

"If it is not Silk Lasso Sam, then I will have to make his acquaintance and do the best I can."

"I can find out by the old signal of the red lasso, I guess, and I have to take my chances of course."

"It will be best for me to hang out to-night and catch on to some of the boys who I know will join us, if the chief wants to get a band together."

"Let me see, there is Grip Saunders for one, Ugly Dan, two, Card Sharp Dave, three and Wild West Will for four."

"And four will be enough to start in with, and if more are wanted I can get them."

"Now to see what it shall be, whether I shall go on the trails to earn my living at the revolver's muzzle, or remain in Yellow Dust Valley and take chances on being allowed to live."

"This decides for me."

He took a light silver dollar from his pocket as he spoke and glanced at it with almost a look of affection.

"Well, old dollar, you have been my companion for many a long year, a pocket piece I have never dared allow to leave me."

"It is heads I take the trails, and tails I remain in Yellow Dust Valley."

"Here goes!"

He tossed the dollar into the air some thirty feet high and watched it as it turned and fell.

It dropped within ten feet of him and stepping forward he picked it up.

"Heads it is!"

"I go on the trails."

"Now to have a talk with my four pards before I go, and I must be cautious, or perhaps I may take my departure through Hangman's Gulch, for that was an angry crowd awhile since in front of The Frying Pan, and Scott King I believe really loves to hang a man."

"Ah! there is Wild West Will now, and he is alone."

"I will call him."

He placed his hands to his lips and gave a perfect imitation of the soft cooing of a dove.

The man in question was walking among the graves in Sunset Rest, and had halted near a number which was known as "Angels' Row," from the fact that all who had been buried there were avowed devils, the antitheses of angels.

The man was a tall, well-formed fellow, dressed as a miner, and wearing a belt of arms, two revolvers and a bowie-knife.

He was of a stripe that coincided with the men who lay in Angels' Row, and doubtless counted all of them as his pards while they were above ground.

At the soft notes of the cooing dove he looked up quickly, waited until the sound was repeated and then moved away in the direction of whence it came.

As he reached the timber he was met by Cast Iron Bill, who said:

"I gave you the call, Wild West Will."

"Oh, yes, I got onto it; but, Bill, this is a very dangerous locality for you, for there was a hot meeting at Frying Pan to-day."

"Ah, I know that, and I wish to have a talk with you, for I am going to leave the valley."

"Where are you going, Cast Iron?"

"On the trails," was the cool response of the man.

CHAPTER XXX.

TAKING TO THE TRAIL.

"DOES yer mean yer intends taking to ther road as a agent?" asked Wild West Will, dropping into the dialect of the border, as men were wont to do.

"I does," was the answer of Cast Iron Bill, also using the dialect.

"Yer means ter tarn road-agent?"

"I does."

"Waal, I believes yer had some experience in thet line."

"No, I were only a spy fer Silk Lasso Sam, but got caughted in his camp when Deadshot Dean led Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and t'others in on us."

"I knows ther ropes though, and I thinks I kin make money a little bit."

"Maybe."

"Now I knows you is no parson, Wild West Will, and so I wants ter understand ef I kin count on you if I sees a chance ter make it pay?"

"I'm with yer, fer yer knows thet I wants dust awful bad."

"And hain't particular as ter how yer gits it?"

"Thet's so."

"Waal, I wants three more, so who would yer name?"

"Say Grip Saunders."

"Good!"

"And Ugly Dan."

"Ther very man."

"And Card Sharp Dave."

"Just the men I named to myself, Will."

"We kin make a good quintette."

"Yer think all kin be depended upon ter go?"

"Yer bet, fer like myself they is uncommon uneasy, and we don't want no rope-walk in ourn."

"I tell yer, Pocket City hain't ther place it was, for it's gittin' too goodie good, yer know."

"So says I, fer we can't string up a man now without having a row on our hands."

"But ter business."

"Go ahead."

"I takes ther trail frum' this place."

"A bad place is a burying-ground ter take ther trail frum."

"I has got ter, fer I hain't goin' inter Pocket City ter git strung up."

"Yer has a big head, Cast Iron."

"I hope it'll git me a big fortin' yit before I dies."

"But now for a rendezvous for us."

"S'pose yer say ther Hangman's Gulch."

"Ther what?"

"Ther Hangman's Gulch, fer it are convenient, and few folks goes thar by day and nobody by night."

"You warn't along last night, Wild West Will?"

"I started with yer, but I were too drunk ter travel, so lay down on ther trail ter camp."

"That is why yer says Hangman's Gulch."

"I did hear as some of ther boys seen a ghost thar."

"Ali of 'em seen ther ghost."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"Then I believes in ghosts, Cast Iron Bill, if you seen him, for I knows you has laughed at others for sayin' so."

"I did see him."

"It wasn't what yer hed been drinkin'?"

"Not much."

"A real ghost?"

"Yas, a deader from 'wayback in ther grave."

"I tell yer, Wild West Will, we got stampeded from Deadshot Dean's cabin when ther Surgeon Scout blew his bugle for ther troop o' that wild soldier captain, Dick Caruth, who would fight a buzz-saw."

"We stampeded like one man, and ther result were we hed but one way ter travel."

"Thet were through Hangman's Gulch?"

"Yas, it were through the upper end o' ther Gulch, for we took along ther ridge, then down across ther cut, and out inter ther trail."

"We looked like we was a-playin' football, and I were still ther leader, I admits."

"Well?"

"When I got down inter ther Gulch, and were a-lookin' toward ther gallows where all them men was hanged, and ther graves was visible beneath, standin' out big in ther moonlight, I seen ther ghost."

"What were it?"

"It were a form in white, standin' upon ther gallows and wavin' its arms wild-like."

"Yer seen it?"

"I did."

"And then?"

"I jist lit out at a pace thet no horse c'u'd hev caught me."

"And t'others?"

"They seen it, too, and it came down from ther gallows and started arter ther gang."

"We hed been makin' peert time on our stampede from ther soldiers, but you bet ther boys yelled like mad and jumped about a mile a minute faster, and I hed ter keep a-goin' ter hold ther lead."

"We scattered at ther camps, and, waal, yer knows ther rest, Wild West Will."

"Then we don't make ther Hangman's Gulch ther rendezvous."

"We don't, that's a fact."

"Then whar?"

"Right here."

"All right."

"Yer sees thet tree?"

"I does."

"Thar is a hole in it jist above yer head."

"I sees it."

"Then come thar fer news, and I'll do ther same."

"Now you is ter see t'others named and all is ter be ready fer my call."

"O. K., Cast Iron Bill."

"If yer finds out any treasure is goin' by ther coach, or comin', write me a line and leave it in thet tree."

"I'll do it."

"Now I is off, so expect ter git a word of writin' soon from me."

"I'll look fer it."

"Good-by, pard," and with a grip of the hand Cast Iron Bill went down the valley toward his horse, while Wild West Will sauntered back toward Pocket City.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE COLONEL AND THE SURGEON SCOUT.
BUFFALO BILL and Surgeon Powell left Pocket City with Deadshot Dean, and the scouts who had taken the bodies into the camps for burial.

They saw that the wild community was cowed, that the attack on Deadshot Dean, what followed, the sight of a "ghost," and the belief

that Buffalo Bill and his scouts, with Captain Dick Caruth and his troopers being in the vicinity, had put a damper upon the most desperate of the men in the camps.

"There will be peace on this part of the border for a while," Surgeon Powell had said, as he parted with Deadshot Dean at his cabin.

"I sincerely hope so, sir, for I dislike turmoil and bloodshed, and yet it seems my fate to have to take human life, deeply as I deplore it."

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature, you know, Mr. Dean, and killing out here is both a trade and a profession."

"Silk Lasso Sam makes it a trade to take human life, while you, Buffalo Bill and myself may class it as a profession, as we do it for a living, so to speak, that is that others and ourselves may live."

"Look sharp now, and don't be surprised, and rest assured if you should be killed, both Cody and I will avenge you, if that is any satisfaction to you."

"It is, and I'll do as much for you both," answered the miner with a smile.

Then farewells were said and Surgeon Powell rode on with Buffalo Bill and his men, for the miner would not hear of either of them remaining with him in anticipation of a visit from the outlaw chief, Silk Lasso Sam, in answer to the letter put in the pocketbook.

A few miles up the trail the Surgeon Scout branched off, going toward the fort, while Buffalo Bill and his men were to go on the stage trail, hoping to catch up with Silk Lasso Sam, or find some clew to him.

The fact was that all were now thoroughly convinced that the outlaw who appeared alone and masked upon the trails, was none other than Silk Lasso Sam, and Buffalo Bill, with fourteen picked men, had received the permission of Colonel Dunwoody to haunt the Overland Trail and its branches, until they captured the mysterious and daring robber.

"You will explain the situation to the colonel, Frank," said Cody, as they were about to part.

"Wholly, Bill, and let him know of the attack upon Dean and just what the opinion of the latter is about the masked outlaw."

"That he feels sure that it is Silk Lasso Sam?"

"Yes."

"And that he has written a letter as a decoy?"

"Yes, and which I hope will get Silk Lasso Sam into a place which will enable the miner to handle him."

"I hope so, though he is taking big chances."

"So I think."

With this the two friends parted, Surgeon Powell pressing on at a good speed toward the fort.

He did not spare his horse, nor halt when night came on, and so arrived in the fort just as the bugle was sounding "lights out."

He sent his horse to the stable and went at once to the quarters of Colonel Dunwoody, who was just bidding farewell to some callers.

They were Major Lester, his wife and Clarice Carr.

"Ah, Doctor Powell, glad to see you back again."

"Let me ask, for the benefit of Major Lester, and of course the ladies who are curious to know, if you have any news of the masked highwayman?"

"Yes, sir, I have, and if you do not mind, as it is hardly a secret, I will tell what has occurred before the major and the ladies."

"Certainly, so sit down again and hear what Surgeon Powell has to say, for I may say he has been away as usual, upon one of his special scouts."

The three visitors resumed their seats, and Surgeon Powell went on to relate his adventures:

"As you requested Colonel Dunwoody, I went to see Deadshot Dean, and met Buffalo Bill and his men on the way."

"It is well that I did, for the scouts went with me to the cabin of the miner, and not finding him there we camped in the valley near, but were awakened by hot firing, so mounted and went to the rescue, for it came from Dean's cabin."

Then the surgeon went on to tell the story of the rescue, the mob they found there, how well the miner had defended himself with his fatal aim, and the clever ruse of Buffalo Bill to prevent an attack upon the scouts, followed by the stampede at his call for troops that were not there, and the increased speed of the fugitives when a "ghost," appeared in the Hangman's Gulch.

All laughed heartily at this, and then the events of the following day were related, and the parting with the miner at his cabin and Buffalo Bill upon the trail, while he returned to the fort.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A FAT OUTLAW.

"AND you say that the miner was held up, when on Four-in-hand Frank's coach going to Yellow Dust Valley?" asked the colonel.

"He was, sir," replied Frank Powell.

"And by this same solitary masked horseman?"

"Yes, sir."
 "And robbed?"
 "Of a pocketbook, sir, containing a few dollars, and a decoy letter."
 "A decoy letter?"
 "Yes, sir, and that is just where I feel a dread of the result to Dean."
 "Explain, please."
 "Well, sir, Dean had just come from the East, and if the masked road-agent is Silk Lasso Sam, he of course knew that the miner had seen his sister."
 "So Dean wrote a letter, saying he had seen Miss Leigh, and telling the outlaw that he had news for him, if he would come to his cabin to get it."
 "Then, Miss Leigh sent her brother word by Dean?"
 "Oh, no, colonel, for she faithfully believes that he has kept his pledge to her."
 "I see."
 "But Dean took this as a chance to come across the outlaw upon equal terms, and so made this appointment with him to come to his cabin."
 "That is a most daring act upon the miner's part, but then he is an utterly fearless fellow."
 "He is, indeed, Colonel Dunwoody, and it shows his nerve to make such an appointment, for he must depend wholly upon himself when the outlaw goes there."
 "If he goes."
 "Of that, sir, there appears to be no doubt in the mind of Dean."
 "Then may the saints protect the miner, for he will have to deal with a desperate man."
 "One of the most desperate of men, sir."
 "Both Buffalo Bill and myself offered to remain concealed at the house of the miner, to await the outlaw's coming, but Dean's high sense of honor would not permit it, as he said it would look treacherous and cowardly to lead him into a trap of the kind, while, to find him alone there, it would be a case of man against man."
 "Brave fellow."
 "Yes, that is the kind of a man I admire," Clarice Carr remarked, and she had seemed a most deeply interested listener to all that the Surgeon Scout had said.
 "So we left the miner to carry out his plot in his own way, I started upon my return for the fort, sir, to report to you, while Buffalo Bill went on with his men to endeavor to meet the outlaw before he should go to the cabin of Deadshot Dean."
 "If they do find him then Dean will wait in vain for his coming," said Major Lester significantly.
 "Yes, and I hope they may, and will kill him, for, for the sake of his sister, I do not wish the outlaw hanged."
 "But you are sure that Dean thinks there is no doubt as to the man being Silk Lasso Sam, Powell?"
 "Yes, colonel, the miner felt no doubt of it whatever."
 "How did he account for his having a beard beneath his mask, and for his increased bulk of form?"
 "A false beard, sir, and skillful padding would make the disguise, sir, he thinks."
 "Very true."
 "And he furthermore remarked, most truthfully I thought, after considering it from my own standpoint, that he had never yet seen a fat outlaw, a man of his weight who would dare trust himself to the back of a horse for narrow escapes, nor had he ever met a really fat man who was a villain."
 "He is a man of brains, this miner, to submit such a proposition for consideration, and I believe he is right, for I do not know in my experience of a really fat man who is a rascal," the colonel said with a laugh.
 "Nor do I," Major Lester remarked.
 "How about fat women, colonel?" asked Clarice with a smile.
 "I leave the surgeon, who is a closer student of both sexes than I am, to answer you, Miss Clarice."
 "That is hardly fair, Colonel Dunwoody, to shift the responsibility upon your staff officer," returned Clarice.
 "That is what a staff is for, Miss Clarice, to bear the weight of responsibility," was the colonel's smiling reply.
 "And will Surgeon Powell retreat also?" asked Mrs. Lester.
 "If he does, it will not be bearing out his record in the face of an enemy, for all say that Surgeon Powell is a man to die in the last ditch and with his face to his foe, no matter what the odds."
 Frank Powell arose and bowed low to Clarice for her words, and then replied:
 "My foes have been men, Miss Clarice, not women, and I admit that before a petticoat contingent I would skedaddle."
 "But, as the colonel has called upon me to answer the query as regards whether the miner's opinion of fat men not being villains holds as well in the case of fat women, I can only reply that no rule holds good where a woman is concerned, for where men are often alike, no two

woman ever are, and therein is their greatest attraction to me."
 "I think you have done yourself justice in your answer, Surgeon Powell, and I will go further and say that I do not believe fat people of either sex are wicked," said Clarice, and soon after the major and the ladies took their leave, and the Surgeon Scout remained alone with his colonel.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SURGEON SCOUT'S MISSION.

FOR some time after the departure of the major and the ladies, Colonel Dunwoody sat in silence, a silence which the Surgeon Scout seemed not to care to break in upon.
 But at last the colonel said:
 "Powell, you are in my confidence, and after my letter from Miss Leigh, which you know of, it was very kind of you to offer to go to Pocket City and see Deadshot Dean for me."
 "I was very glad to do so, Colonel Dunwoody, and will be happy to do anything in my power for you, sir."
 "I feel that, and I shall not hesitate to ask you, if aught comes up you can help me in."
 "Now, Miss Leigh's letter to me told of Dean's return, and asked me to give him all the protection needed, as she understood well the nature of the people he had come back among!"
 "It seems, sir, that she does know them thoroughly, for but for our arrival at his cabin, those demons would have hanged him, and under the ridiculous charge of having murdered Bonnie Belle, as you know Miss Leigh is only known in the mines."
 "Yes, I know, and I trust she will only so remain known."
 "But I felt that you were the one to help him if he needed aid, and you did so."
 "Now tell me if you had any talk with him about that strange and beautiful woman?"
 "I did, sir, and I can tell you that it was her brother, this outlaw whom we know as Silk Lasso Sam, that shot Dean as his successful rival, and caused him to fly to the West."
 "Miss Leigh would force the Deans to go to her home with her, and they live there together, and hence her interest in the miner."
 "And why did he return here?"
 "He believes he has to work a new lead that will pan out rich for him, sir, and he is anxious to get a large enough fortune to become independent."
 "Well, he is a noble fellow, and I suppose you told him that it was my wish that he resume his position as the detective of the mines, which he held before going East?"
 "I did, sir."
 "And his answer?"
 "That he thanked you, sir, and would obey orders."
 "I believe he will render good service, too."
 "There is no doubt of that, sir; but I have a suggestion to make, colonel, if you will permit?"
 "Certainly."
 "Would it not be well, sir, for Dean to pick out half a dozen good men whom he has every confidence in, and have them ready to obey his command, if necessary?"
 "A good suggestion indeed, doctor."
 "He could pay them a small sum, have them secretly his allies, and they would be near if needed at any time."
 "The very thing, and when you go again to the mines I will have you tell him to do so, and he can of course send the pay-roll to me for monthly payment of himself and the men."
 "They would also be a protection to him, should he get into trouble, and I cannot but feel that he is living in hourly peril of his life."
 "He is, sir, yet he is a man who knows how to take care of himself, as I have had every reason to know."
 "Still, a man's life hangs by a very slender thread, as no man knows better than you, who are a skilled physician and surgeon."
 "That is true, sir."
 "Now, what is Cody doing?"
 "Haunting the trails like a nightmare, sir."
 "Good!"
 "He is first upon one trail, then another, and he is sleepless in his watchfulness and determination to run that masked outlaw to earth."
 "And will do it if it can be done."
 "He will, sir, and he wished me to say that he was going to divide his force of fifteen men, all told, into three squads of five, one of which he will command, another be under Texas Jack and a third under Arizona John."
 "These are to take the three trails and keep them patrolled, reporting to each other every second day, and if the masked highwayman appears he will get into very dangerous company."
 "You suggested to him that I did not wish to have to hang him, and then have to meet his sister with her brother's blood upon my hands?"
 "I said enough, sir, to assure you that if Silk Lasso Sam is taken alive, if it cannot be avoided and he has to be, that his captors will pass through Pocket City upon their way with their prisoner to the fort, and he will never get out of the mines alive."
 "Should it not be necessary to take him alive,

he will be killed most assuredly, sir, while, should he keep this appointment with Deadshot Dean at his cabin, unless he kills the miner, he will never live to tell the story."
 "I am glad of this, and I do hope never to see the man again alive."
 "I do not think you need have the slightest fear of doing so, colonel."
 "But it is getting late and I will not keep you up longer."
 "And you have had a hard trip of it, and must be worn out."
 "I should have thought of that, so good-night," and the colonel shook his staff officer warmly by the hand as the Surgeon Scout took his departure for his own quarters.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SIGN OF THE RED LASSO.

THE desperado known as Cast Iron Bill was a man, under ordinary circumstances, fully capable of taking care of himself.
 He was a man of courage, such as a brute might possess, the cunning of a coyote and was of great strength, endurance and a dangerous hand with any weapon he might select to fight a foe with.
 Against a mob he had no desire to argue, and hence he was cunning enough not to place the temptation in their way of hanging him.
 He had too rough a knowledge of what the temptation was, and a mob was unreasonable very, he had had reason to know.
 So he went back from the burying ground, after parting with Wild West Will, his ally, to where his horse awaited him in the valley.
 The animal was a good one, and the rider was equipped for a long trail.
 He mounted and rode on through the timber until he had flanked the mining cabins about Pocket City, and then struck into a trail leading over to the one which the coach took on its run out of Yellow Dust Valley.
 He reached the trail while the sun was yet an hour high, and rode off of it into a group of rocks which he seemed to have visited before.
 Dismounting he walked up to one rock, and after an effort turned it over, for it weighed all of three hundred pounds.
 Beneath it was a cavity, walled in with small stones, and covered over.
 In this was cached a bundle, canteen, bag of provisions and a lasso of scarlet, for it had been painted that hue.
 "Good! this hiding place has never been found, so I am well fixed."
 "Now I will ride on to the Cliffs and camp," for that was a favorite place of the Silk Lassoes, and if I do not find the chief in that neighborhood, then I must follow the trails until I do come up with him."
 "Whenever I do find him I know that the red lasso will protect me, if it is the chief, and if not, then I must take my chances with whoever it is."
 Having replaced the stone as before, over the now empty space beneath, the man mounted and continued on to what he had spoken of as the Cliffs.
 It was just sunset when he came to where the trail ran through a narrow canyon, and there was a smaller one branching off to the right.
 Just as he was about to turn into this a voice from seemingly overhead called out:
 "Halt!"
 "You are covered, so hands up!"
 Cast Iron Bill obeyed with remarkable alacrity, but as he raised his hands over his head the red lasso was in them.
 "Ay, pard, my hands is up, and let yer eyes rest on ther red lasso," he called out.
 There was a silence of some minutes or more, and then, down the side of the rock, from where he was hiding in a burly tree that clung in the cliff, slid a man by the aid of a lariat.
 He drew the lariat over the limb it had been around, coiled it and then walked up to where Cast Iron Bill still sat upon his horse, his hands raised above his head, still grasping the red lasso, while he eyed his captor anxiously.
 That captor was a man of tall form and very stoutly built.
 He was dressed in blue blouse shirt, with black silk scarf knotted sailor-fashion under his collar, and black corduroy pants stuck in heavy boots, upon the heels of which were spurs.
 He had a rifle slung at his back, had hung the lariat on a hook in his belt, and besides the revolver he held in his hand, carried two others and a bowie-knife, all showing how thoroughly well armed he was.
 His head was covered by a sombrero of very broad brim, and his face was wholly concealed by a mask, beneath which was visible a long beard.
 As he wore gauntlet gloves not a particle of his skin was visible to reveal whether he was white, red or black.
 Cast Iron Bill looked at him as one might whose life hung upon the say-so of the man.
 "Well, sir, I am the Toll-gatherer of the Overland Trails, so what have you to offer?" came the stern words as the revolver looked up into the face of Cast Iron Bill, while the eyes through the holes in the mask also peered into his.

"One who carries the Red Lasso does not pay toll, pard," was the reply of Cast Iron Bill.

"Ab! who told you this?"

"The chief."

"What chief?"

"Silk Lasso Sam."

"What do you know of him?"

"A great deal."

"Where is he now?"

"He escaped from the fort where they had him in irons, awaiting death upon the gallows, and has gone back to the trails again."

"How do you know?"

"I have eyes."

"Well?"

"You are Silk Lasso Sam."

The outlaw laughed and asked:

"Do I look like Silk Lasso Sam, with this beard and this form?"

"No, you do not; but though you may deceive others you cannot fool me."

"Who are you?"

"Well, I was Silk Lasso Sam's spy, but back in Pocket City I was known as Cast Iron Bill."

The outlaw looked at him steadily a moment and then said, sternly:

"Come with me."

CHAPTER XXXV.

HOPES REALIZED.

It was the day following the departure of the Surgeon Scout and Buffalo Bill from the home of Deadshot Dean before the latter prevailed upon himself to go to work.

He felt very homesick coming back to his desolate cabin in the mines, no matter what his comforts, after leaving Eden Valley and his loved ones.

He was cut, too, at the fact that he had been forced to kill his fellow-men, evil though they were, immediately upon his return, for it seemed like a bad omen to him for the future.

There was far more of comfort in his cabin than ever before, however, much more to make him contented and comfortable, while he had strong hopes that his claim was going to be far better paying than in the past.

His wife and Ruth had put their heads together, and the result was a bundle of blankets, a soft pillow, clothing, cooking utensils and many other things that would be most useful to him.

Then he had his rubber boots, blanket and storm coat for wet weather, provisions of the best kind, and in fact he had come back West with a very liberal supply of baggage.

All had been put in place, and things put to rights, so that he could begin work the next morning in his mine.

He was up early, had breakfast, and went to work with right good will.

He had a new pick and shovel, and attired in his working clothes, started down the steep trail to the valley.

Winding around the mountain spur he followed the stage trail for a short distance, and then turned into the canyon where the scouts had encamped, for there was water and grass there in plenty.

The remains of a recent encampment having been there greeted the eye of the miner as he approached.

But he did not halt at the camp, but held on up the canyon.

It narrowed as he went along until at last the walls of the canyon became wild, lofty and more rugged, and the shallow stream flowing through it gently below, now tumbled over the rocks with the force of a torrent, forming a snowy cataract.

At one side, in the base of the cliff, was the claim, or mine of the miner.

It was a large hole in the rocks, outside of which there was a quantity of earth piled up, and a placard on a board read:

"MINE OF CARROL DEAN."

Upon the rocks had been painted in red letters as follows:

"HANDS OFF!"

"The claim of Carrol Dean."

"Will be protected to the fullest extent."

"DEADSHOT DEAN,"

"Owner."

Into this hole in the rocks went the miner. He had looked about for any traces of the place having been disturbed, but found none.

His old tools and his two lanterns were where he had left them, and the place seemed not to have had a visitor since his departure months before.

The mine had been dug in two directions, straight in from the mouth, and for a considerable distance, and then to the left for a short distance.

To the right there were signs that the miner had just begun to dig there, and after a few days' work had stopped.

He now turned his attention in this direction, lighted his lamps and set to work.

His new pick sunk deep, and after half an hour's hard blows he gathered the loose earth together

on a large piece of canvas he had spread for it and dragged it out into the light.

There the sunlight streamed down upon the earth, and innumerable little sparkles caught the miner's eyes.

He quickly dropped down upon his knees, ran his fingers through the loose earth and began to cast the shining particles to one side until his large silk handkerchief held quite a treasure in the yellow metal.

"Thank God!"

"At last my hopes are realized and I have struck it rich," came fervently from his trembling lips.

"Yes, here is an hour's work panning out for me more than I have at times gotten in a week."

"And there is no mistake, for this is the pure, yellow metal, and the vein will continue to pan out generously for some time yet, or else all signs fail."

"Just see here, I have in this handkerchief all of a hundred dollars."

"This is good-luck enough for one day, and I shall quit work, go back to my cabin and write my darling wife of the good news, that at last my hopes are realized."

It took a man of strong nerve not to be seized with the gold fever then and there.

But he resisted the feeling to yell, dance and go wild with the delirium of joy, and went carefully over his loose dirt again to see that there were no precious particles lost.

Then he retraced his way to his cabin, sat down and wrote two letters, one to his wife the other to Ruth, and walked over to Pocket City to mail them.

Returning to his cabin he set about getting supper, when suddenly a form darkened the doorway and looking up quickly he beheld the masked road-agent of the Overland peering at him, and covering him with his rifle.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MINER AND THE OUTLAW.

THE miner was caught at a disadvantage.

His belt of arms being over on the wall of his cabin, ten feet from him, and the outlaw had him covered with his rifle.

But Deadshot Dean was a man of iron nerve.

He did not flinch or show the slightest sign of fear, but turning squarely toward the outlaw said in his cool way:

"We meet again, sir, it seems."

"We do."

"You have accepted my invitation to call upon me?"

"I have come to see you in response to a letter found in a pocketbook which you gave me, at my urgent request, at the time I held you up."

"Yes, I wrote the letter for you to come and I am glad to see you."

"That remains to be seen."

"The fact cannot be contradicted, sir, that I am really glad to see you."

"You believe that I am Silk Lasso Sam."

"I know that you are."

The outlaw laughed, and replied:

"You must not be too sure."

"But I am sure."

"And upon what grounds?"

"Your bearing, voice, and the fact that you have gone back to your old trade of outlawry."

"You are mistaken, for I am not Silk Lasso Sam."

"I do not believe you."

"What can I do to prove that I am not?"

"Unmask."

"I unmask for no man."

"But what is it you want with Silk Lasso Sam, for his mantle has fallen upon my shoulders and I shall wear it."

"If you are not Silk Lasso Sam, I have nothing to say to you."

"I represent him."

"That may be."

"Do you know Silk Lasso Sam?"

"Only too well."

"Then you should know that we are of far different build from each other."

"It appears so, but appearances are often deceiving."

"Well, I wish to know, for Silk Lasso Sam, why that letter was written?"

"Can I not see Silk Lasso Sam?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He has left the road."

"Given up outlawry?"

"Yes."

"How do you know this?"

"Because I am his friend."

"Who are you?"

"The Masked Outlaw of the Overland."

"Where is Silk Lasso Sam?"

"He has gone!"

"Gone where?"

"South."

"To what part of the South?"

"He is going to South America after awhile."

"Why has he delayed?"

"Because he needed some more money."

"How will he get it by delaying?"

"From me."

"How is that?"

"Well, I am to pay him a certain sum, and I am doing the work for him."

"Well, what I wished to see Silk Lasso Sam for was just this."

"He was saved from the gallows under certain conditions, and I believed, as all others do, that you were Silk Lasso Sam."

"I left his sister East a few weeks since, and she was robbed on her way, on Four-in-hand Frank's coach, of all that she had with her."

"She was led to believe that the robber, yourself, was Silk Lasso Sam, who had given her his solemn pledge to give up outlawry and leave the country."

"I know she gave him a large sum in money, and if he got what she was robbed of I know that he had a small fortune, for he had the money, which she did not know of, that had been found upon him when he was captured."

"Now, Bonnie Belle asked me to see this masked outlaw and have a talk with him, and if confident that he was Silk Lasso Sam to say to him that she would not raise a finger to save him again, after his broken pledges to her, and that he must accept all of the consequences of his act, with no ray of hope that she will lend a hand to help him, for she is done utterly in making any effort to redeem him."

"Well, as Silk Lasso Sam has not broken his pledges to her, and has gone from the scenes of his lawlessness, and will go from the country when he has added, through me, a certain sum to what he has, what you say does not apply either to him or to me."

"And you expect to go on as you have begun in your lawless acts?"

"Why not?"

"You seem to forget that there is a rope-end to your deeds."

"It is catching before hanging."

"Very true, but you cannot expect to escape in the future as you have in the past."

"Why not?"

"For there are those upon your trail who will yet bring you to justice."

"I doubt it."

"Don't be too sure, for Buffalo Bill is not a man to give up a trail until he gets to the end of it."

"And when Buffalo Bill makes a dash at me, believing that he has only the masked outlaw to deal with, he will find that he rushes into an ambush that will be the end of his career—Hold! do not move an inch, Deadshot Dean, or you are a dead man."

"I came here to capture you, and I shall carry out my intention."

"Ho, men, come in and bind this prisoner!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MISSING.

JUDGE SCOTT KING felt disappointed that there was not a hanging in Hangman's Gulch, to follow the attack upon the cabin of Deadshot Dean.

As the "judge" he wished to sentence some one to death.

But as the captain of the Vigilantes he must first find the criminals and capture them, upon the principle of first catching the man needed to be hanged.

The judge had his hands full, for his store was doing a big business. The Fryng Pan was paying fairly well, Devil's Den was bringing in a fair income nightly, he had certain legal cases to decide upon, and there were directions to give the Vigilantes.

Altogether the judge had more than he could stagger under, and he was very glad to know that the miner had returned to take the management of Bonnie Belle's affairs.

The fact was Scott King was an honest man, and he worked harder to have Bonnie Belle's accounts straight to a cent than he would have done for himself.

He already had it in his mind to buy the property of The Fryng Pan and the Devil's Den, and take full charge as owner, placing a manager over his store, which could be run with far less trouble than the hotel or gambling and drinking saloon.

He had only his salary for the care of The Fryng Pan and Den, as long as they belonged to Bonnie Belle, but as his own he would be far differently situated.

Hence he was anxious for the miner to come and look over figures under his management, name the price which Bonnie Belle wished for her properties, and, if he could do so, to become master himself.

Deadshot Dean had asked several days, and the judge had granted the time for him to get settled after his return.

But the days passed and Deadshot Dean did not appear.

Then Four-in-hand Frank came in one afternoon, and stated that he had halted at Deadshot's cabin and the place was all locked up and had a really deserted look.

He had gone to the mine, but found no one

there, and as there had been rain a couple of days before, not a track was visible since then about the cabin or the claim.

"What does it mean, Pard Jedge?" asked Frank.

Judge Scott King was alarmed.

He did not know what it meant, but he had a suspicion, so he said:

"I don't exactly understand it, Frank; but suppose we say nothing about this and go over early in the morning to the miner's cabin and look for ourselves."

"Don't yer think we hed better go ter-night, jedge?"

"It's dark now."

"Yes."

"You seem to forget the Hangman's Gulch, Frank."

The driver started, and said in a whisper:

"Durned ef I hadn't, in my anxious feelings about Deadshot."

"We'll go to-morrow, jedge."

"Yes, with the sunrise, and we will look about to-night to see if we can find any one who has seen the miner, only don't let it be thought that we suspect foul play, only ask if he's been seen in the camps, to-day."

"We'll do it, jedge."

And yet that night in questioning cautiously about regarding the mining man, they could get no clew to the miner's having been seen for several days.

The next morning the judge and Four-in-hand Frank mounted their horses and rode over to the cabin of Deadshot Dean.

They glanced into Hangman's Gulch as they passed, but said nothing.

There were no grim specters visible there in the moonlight, only the spectral memories of the weird place.

Arriving at the cabin, they found that it held no tenant, or if so the one within was either ill or dead.

They looked all about, visited the mine, and still found no trace of the miner, or that he had been about the place the past few days.

Then they considered how they could get into the cabin, for they knew it would be no easy task, when the judge said:

"See here, Frank!"

The driver came to his side.

"Sick, well or dead, he is not inside this cabin."

"How does you know, jedge?"

"Do you not see that the door is padlocked on the outside?"

"So it is."

"He has a secret way of putting a bar up across the door inside, from the outside, but he could not put the padlock in these staples and lock it unless it was done from the outside."

"No, judge, unless some one kilt him inside and locked the door themselves on ther outside."

"That is so, Frank."

"Now, how can we find that out?"

"There is a trap-door upon the roof."

"Yes."

"I'll go up and see if I can't see into the cabin in some way."

"Do so."

Frank did so, and soon called out:

"I kin see all over ther cabin, and ther bed is made and not a thing is disturbed."

"Then that means that Deadshot Dean is missing."

"Yes, he's been kilt away from his cabin, or captured, to my thinking."

"Then our duty is to find him, dead or alive, and hang the guilty ones."

"Sure, ju" and the two returned to Pocket City.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HORSESHOE NED'S PASSENGER.

HORSESHOE NED was on his way to the fort, his eyes on the alert to see if danger lurked ahead, for he was fearful of being held up by the masked outlaw, as had been the case several times before.

The horses were jogging along at an easy pace, and Horseshoe Ned was hopeful that he would get through without being halted, when he suddenly beheld a party of horsemen ahead.

The heart of the driver sunk within him, for his first thought was that he was to be held up by not only the outlaw who had before appeared in mask upon the trails, but by others.

He had one passenger with him, and one who he felt would be a rich haul for the robbers, for he was an old man and one who had the appearance of being well off in this world's goods.

So he called out, as he leant over:

"Look out, old gent, for I guess we is in for a racket with the road-agents."

"My dear sir, don't tell me that I am to be murdered," came in a startled voice from within the coach.

But Horseshoe Ned had taken another look up the trail and quickly called back again:

"No, no, old gent, don't be skeert, fer it's Buffalo Bill and his men."

"Buffalo Bill, that terrible murderer of the West," whined the old man.

"Then we are to have our throats cut."

"Go slow, old man, for yer has got things mixed a leetle."

"Yer is a tenderfoot in spite o' yer white hair, when yer mixes Buffalo Bill up with ther outlaws o' ther Overland, fer he's chief of scouts at the fort, and now on ther trail of the robbers."

"Pardon me, my friend, but I had heard the name and supposed he was a cut-throat."

"Yer s'posed wrong, old pard, for it's Silk Lasso Sam yer has in mind."

"Ah, yes, that is the man."

"But where is this Buffalo Bill?"

"He's a-layin' fer us on ther trail."

"We'll soon git thar."

The old man ducked his head back into the coach and remained quiet, and soon after a cheery voice called out ahead:

"Ho, Ned, have you seen the masked outlaw upon this trip?"

"Not a shadow of him, Buffalo Bill, and now I meets you and your men I guesses we won't, and glad I is, for there's a old party aboard I'd hate to see done up, for I respect gray hairs, I does."

"You have one passenger then?"

"Yes, an old gent who is going to the fort to visit Colonel De Sutro."

"I am glad you are going through all right then, for I was pretty sure you would be held up on this run by Silk Lasso Sam, who, I had reason to believe, had come up this way."

"Whar's ther other boys, Bill?"

"Scattered along the trails, Ned, for we are anxious to stop this road-agent business as soon as we can."

"And you and your men is ther ones ter do it."

"Any word for the fort?"

"Hand this letter, please, to Surgeon Frank Powell," and the scout handed over a letter to the driver.

"I'll do it, Bill."

"Are you the famous Buffalo Bill, may I ask, sir?" the passenger now said, thrusting his head out of the stage window.

"I am Buffalo Bill, sir, but whether famous or not I cannot answer," was the scout's smiling reply.

"I am glad to meet you, sir, and if you will go on with the coach to protect it, I'll pay you well for your services."

"Thank you, sir, but I am paid by the Government for my work, and I do not think you need have any fear of being robbed now."

"Name your price, sir, and you shall have it, for I've got a deal of money with me, and other things I would not like to lose."

"As you are so situated, sir, I will ride on with you past the danger line, but please do not speak of paying for my services, for that is out of the question."

Horseshoe Ned now drove on, and the scout and the four men with him dropped back out of sight behind the coach.

They were not seen again, but Ned knew that they had remained within call until they had passed the danger line, beyond which even the masked outlaw would not dare hold up the coach.

An hour after the stage rolled into Pioneer Post, and the passenger alighted slowly, like a man who felt his years.

He was a man of slender form, bent, and with shoulders that had a considerable stoop.

His hair was snow-white almost, his face clean shaven and he wore gold eye-glasses.

He was dressed like a gentleman of the old school, with gaiters, straps to his pants, a blue cut-away coat with brass buttons, ruffled shirt, in which glittered a fine diamond, buckles upon his shoes and a fob-chain with massive seal.

He leaned somewhat heavily upon his gold-headed cane, and wore a light soft felt hat which he raised politely to Surgeon Powell who was passing and said:

"Pardon, sir, but I am anxious to see Colonel De Sutro, please."

"I will conduct you to his house with pleasure, sir," and offering his arm the Surgeon Scout led the way to the quarters of the lieutenant-colonel of the post.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

COLONEL DE SUTRO'S GUEST.

SURGEON POWELL conducted the passenger by the coach direct to the quarters of Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro.

He told him to lean upon him for support, as they went along, and said:

"You must feel the fatigue of your long journey, sir, for it is no easy work to come this far by coach even for a young man?"

"I am beyond sixty, sir, yet still quite strong, and a day's rest will bring me around all right."

"I hope the colonel is at home, sir?"

"I think, sir, that he is not, but his wife is, and he is about the post somewhere, for I met him at the club a short while since."

"Here is his home, sir."

"I thank you for your kindness, sir, and trust we will meet again."

"My name is Mayhew, sir, Carter Mayhew."

"And I am Frank Powell, sir, the surgeon of the post."

"There is Mrs. De Sutro now, sir."

"Good-evening," and the surgeon took his departure.

Mrs. De Sutro was a very handsome woman and her rich olive complexion and large black eyes showed her Mexican blood.

She advanced gracefully toward the visitor, seeing that he was a stranger and an old man, and greeted him pleasantly.

"You are the Senora De Sutro?" the old man said grasping both of her hands in his own, and gazing earnestly into her face, while he spoke in perfect Spanish.

"Yes, senor, I am, and am I so remiss, as to forget where we have met before, for I recall your face though not your name."

"Did you ever hear of Carter Mayhew?"

"Ah, yes, sir, an American gentleman who was my father's partner, and afterward went to Brazil?"

"Yes."

"I was a very little girl then, sir, but I recall you now, and I am most happy to see you."

"Come in, sir, and let me send for your baggage, for I know that you could have only come by the stage just arrived, and you are to be our guest, for my husband will be delighted to see you, as also will our adopted daughter and the ward of Colonel De Sutro, the Senorita Nina De Sutro," and Mrs. De Sutro rattled on, seeming happy to speak her own language once more.

"It is to see the Senorita De Sutro more particularly that I have come, senora, and yet I do not wish to intrude."

"On the contrary, sir, you shall be an honored guest—oh! here is the colonel now."

Colonel De Sutro had met Surgeon Powell and learned that a guest had gone over to his quarters, so he had at once hastened home.

The colonel was at once presented by his wife. He recalled having often heard of Mr. Carter Mayhew, a Texan gentleman who had had large business interests with his wife's father, but more particularly with Nina's father, and it was a known fact in the family that there was a certain amount of property that could be obtained for Nina, could the whereabouts of the said Mayhew be found to give certain testimony, but, since his departure for Brazil no clew could be obtained to his location.

Colonel De Sutro was a money-loving man, and he was the guardian of Nina, and he took pleasure in managing her affairs and handling her money.

The will had given him control of her fortune until she was of age, which was to be very soon, and then he would have to turn all over to her.

He had the satisfaction of knowing that all that she had inherited, with a certain interest, less expenditures and his claim as executor, he could place in her hands, and she would be a very rich girl.

But he also had the satisfaction of knowing that he had taken big chances in investments, and that all profits had been put aside to his credit, as well as religiously kept from Nina, as he argued that there was no need of her knowing it.

Now, with the reappearance of Mr. Carter Mayhew, he hoped that there would be more for him to care for as Nina's guardian, if only for the short while which must elapse between then and the young lady's coming of age.

So Mr. Carter Mayhew was welcomed most cordially by the colonel, who led him himself to the best room in the house, and saw that he was surrounded with every comfort.

"Rest yourself, sir, for an hour, then have a bath and join us at dinner, when you will meet my adopted daughter."

"But how did you ever find us?"

"I think, colonel, that I was the one that was lost, for I have dwelt many years in Brazil, as I suppose my dark complexion shows."

"I was at first most unfortunate in my business there, but at last managed to get into a streak of good fortune and made money."

"I married a wealthy Brazilian lady, and after some years she died, leaving me childless."

"At last I had a yearning to come back and die in my own country, and in looking over some papers I discovered that I possessed one which would keep the heirs of my old partner out of a large fortune."

"I at once disposed of my interests in Brazil and came to Mexico to look them up, and so traced you here."

"That is my story, sir, and now I will take your advice about that rest for an hour, bath, and joining you later at dinner."

CHAPTER XL.

AN ANCIENT SPORT.

PUNCTUAL to the second was Mr. Carter Mayhew at dinner, a meal which Colonel De Sutro's foreign training always made him make much of in his family.

He dressed for dinner religiously, and expected all others to do the same about him.

Mr. Mayhew's trunk had been sent to his room, and he came down in a toilet which even Colonel De Sutro could find no fault with.

His ruffled shirt was a wonder, and he affected the fashion of South Americans and wore much jewelry, for he had three diamonds sparkling in his shirt bosom, a pair of diamond cuffs, and wore upon his left little finger a seal ring of rare beauty, with a ruby of great size and brilliancy upon his right.

His shoe-buckles were of gold, and his white hair was scented and clustered in ringlets all around his head, while his perfect white teeth caused Nina to wager with herself that they were false.

He bent low when presented to Nina, kissed her hand and offered his arm gallantly to Mrs. De Sutro to lead her in to dinner.

His very dark face, spectacles and snowy hair, with his rich toilet, gave him a very distinguished appearance, and they soon found him a very brilliant talker.

"If he wasn't so round-shouldered and did not have false teeth, I'd marry him, old as he is," said Nina with a laugh, as she left the dining-room with Mrs. De Sutro, leaving the gentlemen to their cigars and coffee.

"I do not believe his teeth are false, Nina, but his stoop and almost hump-shoulders are a drawback, I admit.

"But I judge that he is a very rich man, and has no children to mother."

"Yes, that is something, and he is very rich, I am sure, and money covers a multitude of faults.

"But what a jolly old sport he is: takes his whisky straight without flinching and emptied his glass of wine with military precision, while he tells a funny story with the look of an undertaker and is certainly a most entertaining companion."

"Yes, you had better be an old man's darling than a young man's slave," said Mrs. De Sutro.

"I could never be any man's slave, now—that time has gone by," was the almost fierce remark of the beautiful girl, and while her eyes flashed for a minute, they at once drooped and became sad and dreamy in expression as memories of the past flashed over her, called up by Mrs. De Sutro's words.

A pleasant evening was passed in the parlors, a game of whist being played, in which the guest showed himself an expert.

But remembering his long journey they retired early, and all felt that their guest was a very superior man, and were in ecstasies over the thought that his coming would enrich Nina by a very large amount.

"If his hair was not so white, and he did not have that stoop in the shoulders, he would not appear at all old," said Mrs. De Sutro to her husband.

"But he is old, and the old sinner has had a very gay life of it I am sure.

"It would not be so bad if Nina caught him, for he is enormously rich and would leave her very soon a millionaire widow," the colonel replied.

The next day the guest met some of the people at the fort.

He was introduced to Colonel Dunwoody and Major Lester, and at the club that night met a number of the younger officers, among them Surgeon Powell.

He joined in a game of cards with a party of young men, and two hours after arose from the table with all the cash they had to spare for a month.

This started others, who felt that he was rich, to seek for a game with him, hoping to make a good haul, but somehow the "Ancient Sport," as they called him at the officers' club, was always the winner.

He took a horseback ride with Nina, and if he did stoop in the saddle, he yet showed himself an excellent rider.

There was a shooting-match in which he was asked to join, and he sent his bullets to dead-center, explaining his good aim by saying:

"You know in Brazil we often had duels on our hands, and down there they shoot to kill, so I had to drop my man or die myself, and I preferred the former, you know."

The colonel, to do honor to the De Sutros, invited their guest to dine with him, and Major Lester did the same, and for the first time the Ancient Sport met Clarice Carr.

He seemed at once impressed with her and devoted himself to her all the evening.

Upon returning to the home of his host, he said:

"I think she is a phenomenal beauty, handsomer than you are, Senorita Nina, and with perhaps a more exquisite form, for she is willowy grace itself.

"I never saw a woman more catching; but do you know I have thus far forgotten to give you and Mrs. De Sutro some little souvenirs I brought for you," and the Ancient Sport hastened to his room, while Nina frowned at the compliment he had paid to Clarice Carr over her shoulders.

CHAPTER XLI.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

THE "souvenirs" referred to by the ancient sport were a superb gemmed bracelet for Mrs. De Sutro, and a ring of rare beauty

for Nina, which at once brought back the smiles to her face.

There was also a very elegant meerschaum pipe for Colonel De Sutro, all of which were most highly appreciated.

The guest had been a week in the fort and thus far had made no other allusion, than what he had at first said, about the property he had in his keeping for Nina.

The colonel and Mrs. De Sutro anxiously talked over this oversight together, yet they dared not ask him about what he had come so far to make known.

Nina also was anxious to know about the inheritance she had been kept out of thus far, what it amounted to and what it consisted in, yet she, too, felt a delicacy about bringing up the subject.

One afternoon the Ancient Sport asked Nina to go on a ride with him, and she readily consented, though the colonel urged that they should not go far from the fort.

"Though Buffalo Bill and his men are out on the trails, there is yet dread to be felt of this masked outlaw, for he moves about in a most mysterious way," said Colonel De Sutro.

"We shall get into no danger, Senor Colonel," responded the Ancient Sport, and mounting the two rode away.

They took a trail leading down the river, and coming to a few trees growing upon a point of land, Mr. Mayhew said:

"Let us dismount here, Senorita Nina, and sit on that log, for I have something to say to you."

Nina acquiesced at once, wondering if it was an avowal of love, for the old man had seemed most devoted, or that he wished to tell her about her inheritance.

In either case she would be interested, and she had heard that old men were quick wooers, perhaps because life is so short as they begin to realize after they have passed the half century line.

He aided Nina to alight with the courtly grace which distinguished him, hitched the horses to a tree near by and seated himself by her side.

"Senorita Nina, I must refer to your past life, if you will pardon me, and you must tell me wherein I err, for it is my right to know all, before I come to an understanding with you about the business that has brought me here."

"Certainly, sir," and Nina De Sutro turned pale, for she had a history she was not willing for stranger eyes to read.

But then this man of course must know all, she thought.

"Of course," he went on, "my intimacy with your family in the past made me acquainted with many facts regarding your people which otherwise you might be surprised at.

"Now see if I am right?"

"I will hear all that you have to say, sir."

"You were left to the guardianship of Colonel De Sutro, and it was decided that you should be sent to Mexico to be educated in a convent there."

"Yes, sir."

"A nun came after you, and in returning, while crossing the Rio Grande in your carriage, your coachman was drowned, and you and your protectress would have shared the same fate but for your rescue by a young man, an American."

"It is true, sir."

"Later, when on a vacation from the convent and visiting relatives in the City of Mexico, you met at a tournament this same young man, who proved himself the victor over all he met, and that meeting ended in your running away with him, though you were but a child, and becoming his wife."

"Am I right?"

"Yes."

"He deserted you soon after, and you returned to the convent, the good nun alone knowing your secret."

"It is true."

"Why did this man desert you?"

"Because he married me for my money, and finding I could not touch my inheritance until I was of age, he left me."

"You loved him?"

"With all my heart and soul."

"And now?"

"I hate him with more intensity than I ever loved him."

"Have you seen him since?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"A few months ago."

"Where?"

"Here at this fort."

"Ah!"

"Yes, he came here."

"How?"

"In disguise, under an assumed name, pretending to have been robbed on the way."

"And you recognized him?"

"I did."

"And he knew you?"

"Yes."

"Why did he come?"

"To see me."

"For what reason?"

"I will be of age very soon, and he wanted money."

"And got it?"

"Oh no."

"Why not?"

"I would not give him other than a small sum."

"Yet he held your secret?"

"True, and I held his."

"What was that?"

"He killed the driver of the coach in coming here, also a passenger and robbed him, and he was, in fact, nothing more than an outlaw himself."

"An outlaw?"

"Yes."

"Did you know this?"

"Of course."

"Who was he?"

"Silk Lasso Sam."

"Ah! and yet escaped the vigilant eyes that must be upon him here?"

"He was so well disguised, played his part so well and his game was such a bold one that he conquered success," was Nina's reply, almost in admiration of the man's brilliant wickedness.

CHAPTER XLII.

A STRANGE CONFESSION.

THE old man seemed deeply interested in what Nina De Sutro had said about the outlaw, and remarked:

"It seems to me as though you really admire this man's wickedness."

"I admire his pluck and cleverness, though regret that it was not in a good cause instead of an evil one."

"And what became of him?"

"He held me at his mercy of course, as I did him."

"He sought to win more gold than he could get from me, so boldly had his band, with whom he was in communication, kidnap Miss Clarice Carr and himself, while they were out riding together, and the result was that he got men upon his track who trailed him to his den, wiped out or captured his outlaws, and brought him back a prisoner to the fort, after rescuing Miss Carr, whom he expected to hold for ransom."

"And he was executed of course."

"No, he was rescued by his clever sister, who came here for the purpose."

"Where is he now?"

"It is said that his sister rescued him on condition that he would reform and leave the country."

"And he did so?"

"On the contrary he did not, for it is said that this masked outlaw, of whom you have heard so much, Mr. Mayhew, is Silk Lasso Sam."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, so it is said."

"And your opinion?"

"I should not be surprised, for he is capable of anything."

"And you are still his wife?"

"I am."

"And no one knows this secret at the fort?"

"Colonel De Sutro and his wife know that I married when I was a mere girl, but they believe the man to be dead."

"Then you have kept your secret well?"

"Why should I not?"

"I think you are wise."

"May I ask how you knew it?"

"From the good nun."

"Ah!"

"She was forced to tell me all, for you know I went to the convent to seek you, about this inheritance, you know?"

"No, I do not know, Mr. Mayhew, and I

shall be glad to have you explain it all to me."

"In good time I will do so, fair Nina."

"But now let me ask you if there is no one that you are interested in in the fort?"

"How do you mean?"

"Are you in love?"

"Why do you ask the question?"

"From no personal motive, I assure you, for if I cannot win Miss Clarice Carr, I shall never marry."

"You are frank, at least."

"You will find me more so, when you know me better."

"Well, I like frankness, and I'll be frank, too, and tell you that if you expect to wed Clarice Carr, you will never marry."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, she is a woman to have but one love affair in life, and that I am sure she has had."

"Well?"

"She is very rich, so would not marry for money, and that is about the only motive that I can see that would make a young girl marry an old man, even as brilliant and entertaining a one as yourself."

"You are frank indeed."

"But who is it Miss Carr has loved?"

"That is her secret, and she neither has father or mother confessors."

"And you have not learned to love again?"

"I suppose I must still be frank with you."

"Yes, for I shall be the same with you."

"Well, since my girlhood was wrecked, I learned to hate the man that I thought that I loved."

"Then I met another, believing my wicked husband dead, whom I could love, and did."

"Well?"

"I soon found that he loved an ideal, and when he met the reality she won his heart of course, so I had to give him up."

"Who was that?"

"Colonel Dunwoody."

"That is right, aim high, even if you miss the mark."

"But then?"

"I centered my affections upon another, a man known as a splendid fellow, with prospects of rapid promotion, handsome, dashing, and, better than all, very rich."

"Who is he?"

"Captain Richard Caruth, whom his men call Dashing Dick."

"And he loves you?"

"Oh, no."

"What then?"

"He idolizes Clarice Carr, and I don't believe she sees it, but I only wish I had such a man to love me as he does her."

"And then?"

"Why, I have transferred my affections now to Lieutenant Vassar Turpin, the colonel's handsome young aide, and who is also rich."

"With what success?"

"I half-way believe he is in love with Clarice Carr, for in fact all the men are."

"Can you blame them?"

"Though a woman myself, I must answer with all honesty, no."

"And failing with the aide?"

"Well, if you would promise to kill Silk Lasso Sam, my outlaw husband, and die soon after the marriage, I believe I would take you."

"You are most kind; but now, as you have been so frank, so confidential with me, I will be equally so with you, and make a confession."

"I happen to know that Miss Carr has a very large fortune, and if she were kidnapped she would pay a big ransom for her release, and so I came to the fort to carry her off, for, as you hate her, I shall expect your aid."

Nina Du Sutro sprang to her feet now, her face white as a corpse and cried:

"Great God! now I penetrate your disguise—"

"You are Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw, and my husband!"

"You are right; I am," was the cool reply of the pretended old man.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE ALARM.

BACK to Pocket City went the Vigilante captain and Four-in-hand Frank, wonder-

ing at the strange disappearance of Deadshot Dean the miner.

"Yer see, jedge, we must first tackle on to ther galoots who led the racket o' hangin' him, yer know, and see what they has ter say about it," said the driver.

"Yes, and who were they?"

"Cast Iron Bill were the leader."

"That's so."

"And there was Ugly Dan and Wild West Will."

"Yes."

"And Card Sharp Dave, and Saunders."

"Yes, I remember now that those were the men that it is said were loudest in their talk of hanging the miner."

"Now where are they?"

"In the camps somewhere, jedge."

"They must be found."

"Of course."

"I will send my Vigilantes out quietly to bring them all in."

"Then I'll sound the tocsin and let the people know that our dear pard Deadshot Dean is missing, with the chances that he has been done away with."

"It looks so ter me, jedge, and the sooner we knows ther better, while ef he hev been kilt, then thar has got ter be hemp-stretchin' in Hangman's Gulch says I."

"Yes, Frank, there must be."

The two now rode up to The Frying Pan, and an hour after there were a dozen men of the Vigilante band on the search for Cast Iron Bill and his immediate clique, who were well known in Yellow Dust Valley, and also were known to be the foes of Deadshot Dean.

"If we hangs any one, or all of them four, jedge, we can't go amiss, even ef they didn't do away with Deadshot, for we'll be sart'in ter punish 'em for some other deed they has did," volunteered Four-in-hand Frank.

After a long absence the Vigilantes began to drop in one by one and each one had the same report to make to their captain.

"We could not find one of them, sir."

"Where did you go?"

"To their cabins, and everywhere else."

"Had no one seen them?"

"Not since the day after the trouble at Deadshot Dean's cabin."

"Not one of them?"

"We could not find that one of them had been seen since."

"How about their cabins?"

"They were deserted and all had the appearance of having been given up."

The judge looked at Four-in-hand Frank, and the latter looked at the judge.

"What does it mean, Frank?"

"You is ther jedge, and must find out; but it looks ter me as though somebody needs hanging."

"So it does, Frank."

"I'll sound the tocsin and call the people together, and then we must find out the facts of this mysterious disappearance of Deadshot Dean."

And then the judge arose in his wrath, seized the gong, which he called the tocsin, and sent its roaring sound up and down the valley and echoing against the hills, bringing the people of Yellow Dust Valley quickly assembling in front of The Frying Pan.

The crowd that assembled showed that all felt that something unusual had called them together, and they waited impatiently for the coming of the judge.

He soon appeared, with Four-in-hand Frank by his side, and backed by his full company of twenty-four Vigilantes, who had so often proven jury and executioners in the mines, after having run down their man.

The judge lost no time in calling the meeting to order, a thing far more easily accomplished than it is with a political convention where every man wishes to do the talking.

These men were willing to let the judge talk, while they acted when the time came for action.

The judge was always polite and never failed to begin his addresses with the catching word of "Gentlemen."

Now he added:

"And my dear fellow-citizens of Yellow Dust Valley."

After this preliminary he went on to say:

"The ring of the tocsin has called you together upon a most serious matter."

"It casts a deep reflection upon our beauti-

ful valley, the shadow of which will hang over it like a threatening storm-cloud until it is sent rolling away by the execution of those who have been guilty of the foul deed."

"You are well aware that we had in our midst a man who minded his own business, who was ever ready to do a good act, whose hand was the first to be put in his pocket to help one in distress, and who was as peaceful as a lamb until set upon, when he became like an enraged lion if aroused, and protected himself nobly."

"This man has just come back to us from his far-away home, and his loved ones, and started again at his work of mining."

"He came back the authorized agent of Bonnie Belle, who told me that I was to give over to his keeping her affairs here upon his return."

"This was the condition I took it upon."

"And now, ere he has been back with us but a few days, what do we find?"

"A gang of ruffians seeking to hang him upon a false charge, and would have done so had he not been protected by Surgeon Powel of the army and Buffalo Bill with his scouts."

"Thwarted in their work there, these ruffians have now done away with this noble man, Deadshot Dean, for his home is closed, and he is missing from our midst."

"To tell you this, gentlemen, is why I have called you together."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE FRUITLESS SEARCH.

THE announcement of the Vigilante judge was received by the crowd with a silence that was more impressive than the wildest shouts would have been.

Deadshot Dean was a genuine favorite, and greatly admired.

It was only the worst element of the mines, who, fearing him, wished to get rid of him as they did other good men, only the lonely life of Deadshot Dean offered better advantages for doing so.

Now that the Vigilante judge had said that the arrangement of Bonnie Belle with himself, was, should she not return, for the miner to take charge of her business, the people knew that there was no mistake, no charge that could be made against Deadshot Dean.

The affair therefore of the miner's disappearance must be looked into with a will, yes, with a vengeance, so to speak.

The perpetrators of the deed, if Deadshot Dean had been foully dealt with, were of course the ringleaders of the thwarted movement to hang him.

Who were these and where were they?

This question was upon every lip, and at last arose the cry:

"Where are those who sought to hang him?"

This was promptly answered by the judge, who saw that the crowd had at once taken the right trail.

"Gentlemen, you are right."

"Where are the ringleaders of that midnight attempt at hanging?"

"I will explain to you that Four-in-hand Frank, whom you all know, brought me the news that Deadshot Dean was not at his cabin."

"I went there with him, and signs pointed to his having been murdered away from home."

"We returned and my Vigilantes were sent out to bring in the following men, Cast Iron Bill, Wild West Will, Grip Saunders, Card Sharp Dave and Ugly Dan."

"These were known to be a quartette for evil, under the leadership of Cast Iron Bill."

"These men were the ringleaders of the midnight movement against Deadshot Dean, and now that the miner is missing a few days after not one of these worthies can be found, for my Vigilantes failed to find any trace of them; worse than that they had left the mines."

"Now, gentlemen, who of you knows of these men, or where they can be found, and remember the one who hides such a foe to our fair valley is guilty as his ally?"

"Gentlemen, who can give a clew to clear up this mystery?"

The questions were heard by all and the miners read each other's faces.

Those who had last seen any of the des-

peradoes named hastened to tell all they knew about them.

One had seen Cast Iron Bill and Wild West Will talking in the burying-ground, and afterward had seen the latter call together Grip Saunders, Ugly Dan, and Card Sharp Dave, at his cabin, since which time none of them had been seen.

Inquiry failed to find that any of them had been met with by the miners since the day after the burial of those slain by Deadshot Dean in their attack upon his cabin.

"Gentlemen, the absence of these men proves their guilt in the disappearance of Deadshot Dean, and now I enjoin you all to form searching parties to look for the body of the miner, and those men who are under suspicion, and who are to be brought to Pocket City for trial."

A wild shout greeted these words, and half an hour after a score of searching parties, numbering from a dozen to two dozen men, were scouring the country in search of the missing miner and his alleged murderers.

The Vigilantes also went off on a still hunt, divided in two parties, while the judge, Four-in-hand Frank, and a special jury polled for the occasion went to the cabin and claim of the miner to take in the full situation and make what discoveries they could to help the situation.

At the same time the judge got, as well as he could, a list of all who had been in the night attack upon Deadshot Dean, and put two men to secretly keep an eye upon each one of them, as if they attempted to get away it was to be taken as an evidence of guilt, and they were to be arrested.

All business was brought to a standstill, the camps were literally closed up, and the search became general and very extensive and thorough.

But two days failed to unravel any clew whatever, more than that the miner had either been spirited away or murdered, and there could be nothing found of those suspected of the deed, whatever that deed happened to be.

At last the day came for Four-in-hand Frank to start upon his way, and he carried out with him a letter to Bonnie Belle, written by the judge, to whom he had given the address at Eden Valley.

Frank looked sadly at the cabin as he went by, for he was deeply attached to Deadshot Dean, and said to himself:

"It will be sad news for Bonnie Belle when she knows he has gone, and for his loved one in their Eastern home."

And the tender-hearted driver wiped away a tear.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MEETING OF THE OVERLAND KINGS.

THE more that Four-in-hand Frank pondered on the situation, as he drove along the trail eastward, the more he was perplexed to know what had become of Deadshot Dean, and why some clew could not be found to his going and whereabouts.

So wrapped up was Four-in-hand Frank in his meditations, that he had lost all thought of his being possibly held up by the masked road agent, until brought to a sudden realization of the fact by the loud command:

"Halt, there, Four-in-hand Frank, and hands up!"

He halted with a suddenness that threw his wheelers back upon their haunches, and saw in the trail before him the blood-red bay, and the masked face and stout form of the outlaw who defied all pursuit.

"Waal, yer gits serenely left this time, fer I hain't been paid off yit, ther hearse don't hold a passenger and I hain't got a dollar's worth of truck along," said Frank, regaining his composure in an instant.

"No passengers?"

"Nary."

"No booty?"

"Not a dollar."

"I'll see, with your permission."

"I hain't goin' ter give yer permission, and I isn't sich a fool as ter say yer sha'n't."

"Throw me down yer mail bag."

"Thar's nothin' in it."

"That I shall see."

The bag was under the box, and with the muzzle of a rifle upon him Frank could only obey.

The man let the bag fall upon the ground, and then said:

"Come down off that box."

Frank obeyed.

"Lie down upon your back."

This order was also obeyed.

Then the man dismounted, the belt of arms of the driver was unbuckled and taken off, and then with his knife the road-agent cut open the mail bag.

No registered letter was there, but any that felt full were opened in the search for an inclosure of money.

"A poor bag this, but here is a letter I wanted."

"It's got no money in it, and it's only to Bonnie Belle," said Frank.

"That is why I want it."

"I tell yer it has no money in it."

"That may be, but it has news."

"Don't take that letter, Pard Outlaw, and I'll give you a month's pay for it."

"I prefer the letter."

"Now you can go on."

"Darn yer ugly pictur', some time it will be my laugh and you'll be ther one thet gits left, and it'll be at the end of a rope," growled Four-in-hand Frank, as he mounted to his box and drove on.

He left the agent standing in the trail gazing after him, the letter to Bonnie Belle still in his hand, and which, however, he had not opened, as he had the other letters.

These Frank had bundled into the bag again and taken with him.

"Waal, that beats my time, and Bonnie Belle don't git her letter."

"I hain't much on edication, but I guesses I knows how I kin reach her, and thet is through Surgeon Powell or Buffalo Bill who is her friends, and they should know of this holdin' of me up and robbin' of the mail."

"Let me see, if I pushes ther critters hard I can catch Horseshoe Ned at the junction of ther trails, and I'll tell him all, and have him tell Buffalo Bill and ther Surgeon Scout jist what hev happened, so they kin write ter Bonnie Belle."

"Come, critters, yer has got ter keep ther grass from growing on this trail by cuttin' dirt lively as though you was bein' chased by road-agent's."

With this Frank gathered up his reins and sent his team flying along.

It was a race against time, but he had to drive fifteen miles within two hours, and the trail none of the best.

If there on time he headed off Horseshoe Ned, and if not, then he might not see him for a couple of weeks, for the station where he went to, at the end of the run, the driver from Pioneer Post never reached at the same time, so they seldom saw each other, unless one or the other lay over a trip at the eastern end.

The team of six horses was a good one, and the coach being light and the driver in earnest, they went sailing along at a great rate.

The result of his hard drive was that within an hour and a half Four-in-hand Frank reached the place where his trail from Pocket City turned into the one from Pioneer Post.

He unchecked his horses, after giving a whoop at discovering that Horseshoe Ned's coach had not passed, and that he had a resting-spell before he did so.

Soon after the coach of Horseshoe Ned was heard rumbling over the trail, and a few minutes only passed when it turned a bend and drew rein, while, springing from his box the driver met his brother King of the Overland, as these two great masters of the whip and reins were called.

CHAPTER XLVI.

TWO STORIES TO TELL.

"PARD FRANK, I greets yer," cried Horseshoe Ned, as he warmly grasped the hand of his fellow driver.

"Ditto, Ned, and I has druv ther tails off my critters ter git here at ther junction and see yer."

"Anything wrong, pard?"

"Thar is."

"Waal, ef yer observe, I is a half a hour ahead o' time, for I was a drivin' rapid also."

"So I seen."

"Anything wrong?"

"Thar is."

"Waal, I'll tell yer my story, and then hear what you has ter say."

"Go it, for I was a-drivin' ter catch up as quick as possible with Buffalo Bill, seein' as I wants him bad."

"Waal, so does I."

"What has yer ter say?"

"I has been held up."

"So has I."

"What?"

"Gospil truth."

"Ditto, for I were held up by ther masked outlaw, back on Paint Branch."

"That are fifteen miles from here."

"Yes."

"And I were held up by the masked outlaw at Robbers' Run."

"No."

"Yes."

"That are five miles from here?"

"Yes."

"It c'u'dn't hev been ther masked outlaw."

"Yas, but it could."

"He held me up."

"And he held me up."

"Not ther masked outlaw?"

"Yas."

"But it were Silk Lasso Sam."

"He were ther one."

"Thet held you up?"

"Sart'in."

"Thar hain't two of him."

"Waal, it were Silk Lasso Sam."

"Ther same."

The two Kings of the Overland looked at each other fixedly.

At last Four-in-hand Frank asked:

"Is yer playin' me fer a fool, Horseshoe Ned?"

"Jest what I were goin' ter ask you, sir."

"Now see here, we don't want any quarrel, but ter git at ther facts of ther case."

"Jist so."

"I were at Robbers' Run when I were halted."

"Was he on a blood-bay horse?"

"He were."

"Masked?"

"He were."

"A fat man?"

"He were."

"With beard showing under his mask?"

"It were."

"Held a rifle on yer?"

"He did."

"And talked deep and stern, like Silk Lasso Sam?"

"He did."

"Then he were Silk Lasso Sam."

"He were."

"And same man held me up."

"Well, he c'u'd hev cut across ther ridge and did it, for it were two hours ago he tackled me at Paint Branch, and half an hour ago he tackled you."

This poured oil upon the troubled waters, and then Four-in-hand Frank went on to tell his story of how he had been robbed, and all that had been said and done, until he came to the letter of Bonnie Belle which had been taken, and this he explained was why he had wished to head off Horseshoe Ned to have him tell Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell about it, so that they should write at once to the Idol of Yellow Dust Valley, and acquaint her with the situation at Pocket City, and how the miner Deadshot Dean had either been killed or made a prisoner for some purpose.

Horseshoe Ned listened attentively to all his fellow driver had to say, and then said:

"Now I'll tell you my story, pard."

"I wants ter hear it."

"Yer see I hed give up ther thought o' being held up, knowing Buffalo Bill hed men on each trail, and was himself ter be found between this point and ther post."

"I see, but I didn't see none of ther scouts on my trail."

"They seen you, I guesses, for they is there."

"But I were suddenly brought to a halt by the masked outlaw, and his horse were mighty fresh looking for a animal as had been ridden as he hed ter ride ter hold you up at Paint Branch and then stop me at Robbers' Run."

"Waal, he did it," growled Frank.

"I hain't disputing your word, for I allows no man to dispute mine.

"But I does say thet his horse looked oncommon fresh fer sich a gallop."

"Waal?"

"He told me I must excuse him, said he were sorry he were skeering all travel off ther trails, and hoped I hed something of value along.

"I lied to him and said I hed not, and he knows me to be thet truthful he tuk my word, only said as how he'd make a leetle search ter see if my memory were failin' me, fer he said I might hev forgot.

"Ther result were thet he got a boodle of small change going to the sutler at the post, and amounting to a couple of thousand dollars.

"Then he told me ter travel, and not ter let my memory fail me next time.

"So it were thet I drove hard ter catch up with Buffalo Bill and his men, and put them on ther trail o' Silk Lasso Sam—Lordy! see thar!"

As Horseshoe Ned spoke Buffalo Bill came riding along the trail.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE SCOUT SEEKS AID.

THE faces of the two drivers of the Overland brightened as they saw the chief of scouts coming toward them.

Horseshoe Ned felt that he was repaid for the delay, as the scout came from a direction by which he would have missed him, but for his halt to talk with Four-in-hand Frank.

The latter felt that had he not hurried as he had, he would have missed both Horseshoe Ned and Buffalo Bill.

With the scout to pour their troubles into the ear of, both these Kings of the Reins felt the responsibility taken from off their broad shoulders.

They therefore sprung forward to greet him with delight.

Buffalo Bill saw at a glance that something had gone wrong.

Horseshoe Ned was not due at the junction for half an hour yet, and Four-in-hand Frank was all of two hours ahead of time.

What it meant he must at once know, so he said in his cheery way:

"Ho, pard, what's up?"

"You was just on ther spot, Pard Frank, so do your shoutin', and then I'll whisper my story ter Buffalo Bill," said the driver of Pioneer Post.

The story of Frank was soon told, and Buffalo Bill listened without a word.

Then he turned to the other and said; without making any comment:

"It's your turn now, Ned."

The story of Horseshoe Ned was also told, the scout listening in silence.

Then Buffalo Bill asked:

"Ned, just when were you held up?"

The driver gave the time.

"How long have you been here?"

"Just twenty minutes."

"And it was at Robber's Run that you were halted?"

"It were."

"Now, Frank, you were held up at Paint Branch?"

"I were."

"At what time?"

"Twelve o'clock, sharp."

"How long have you been here?"

"Just twenty-five minutes."

"You both say that it was Silk Lasso Sam who held you up?"

"We does."

"He was a stout man?"

"Yes, weighed all of two hundred and fifty."

"That's the man," echoed Ned.

"Had a mask?"

"He did."

"His beard shoved under it?"

"For sure."

"Wore a blood-bay horse?"

"Fact."

"Used a rifle instead of revolvers?"

"Yes, but had ther leetle guns strapped onto him."

"Well, the man could have gone over the range and done both the holding up of you, Ned, and Frank."

"But I do not believe it was the same man."

"I say my man was Silk Lasso Sam," said Ned.

"Says I ther same," chimed in Frank.

"Well, that is the question we are to solve.

"Now, Ned, you say he got a batch of money from you?"

"Yes, the sutler's."

"And a letter from you, Frank?"

"One ther jedge wrote ter Bonnie Belle, and other letters he opened, but that were ther only one he tuk."

"And Deadshot Dean has disappeared?"

"He have."

"And all search for him has been of no avail?"

"We c'uld'n't find him, Bill?"

"You suspected Cast Iron Bill and others?"

"Yes, his gang of four are ther meanest galoots thar be in ther mines.

"You saw some of my men on your trail?"

"No."

"That was because you drove so fast you were ahead of time, for they were to have met you at Eagle Rocks and come on here behind you, but within hearing."

"I see."

"They will soon be here; but now, Ned, I wish you to push your team through on the jump to Pioneer Post."

"I'll do it, Bill."

"You will meet some of my men on the trail, so tell them to come to Robbers' Run to find me."

"Yes, Bill."

"When you reach the fort, go at once to Colonel Dunwoody, without a moment's delay, and tell him what has happened to you and to Frank."

"Yes."

"Say to Colonel Dunwoody that I would esteem it a great favor if he would send Surgeon Powell at once to meet me at Robbers' Run, for I need his valuable services; and more, to please write a letter to Miss Bonnie Belle, explaining to her the situation as you know it from your own experience and what Frank has said, that the miner Dean has disappeared, and that there is no doubt but that this masked outlaw is Silk Lasso Sam."

"I'll be as exact as Scripture, Bill."

"And now get away with all speed."

"I'm off."

And mounting his box Horseshoe Ned sent his team rapidly away along the trail.

"Frank."

"Yes, Bill."

"I shall await here the coming of my men who should have followed close in behind you; but you push on until you meet some of my scouts and tell them to wait for me at Robbers' Run."

"I'll do it, Bill," and the driver of Yellow Dust Valley drove on, leaving the scout alone.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

NO CLEW.

BUFFALO BILL did not have very long to wait for his men.

Soon after the departure of the two coaches the clatter of hoofs was heard and five scouts dashed into view.

They were on the trail of Four-in-hand Frank's coach and were coming at a sweeping gallop.

They soon arrived and the leader called out:

"Ho, chief, have you seen Four-in-hand's coach?"

"Yes, Charlie, he has gone on the way to the station fifteen minutes ago."

"He had passed when we struck the trail and the schedule must have been changed for he was ahead of time."

"We followed, but when we came to where the tracks showed he had been going at full speed, we saw that he was running from somebody, or the team was running away, so we let out in chase."

"He was held up by our masked outlaw, boys, and I have just sent to the fort for the Surgeon Scout by Horseshoe Ned, who was also held up at Robbers' Run."

"I waited here for you, and now I wish three of you to go back to Paint Branch and pick up the trail of the outlaw there, for there is where he halted Frank's coach."

"See if it does not cross the range, and head toward Robbers' Run."

"I have sent by Ned for our boys between here and the fort on the trail, and we will all go to Robbers' Run and pick up the trail there."

"Now, Charlie, you and your two men go to Paint Branch, and try to get well along on the outlaws' trail before night."

"And then, chief?"

"Camp on the trail and pick it up at daylight, sending a man to report to me if it goes astray from my expectations, and look for me, or some one to tell you where I am, at Robbers' Run."

"All right, chief," and Charlie the scout and two others, started back upon the trail by which they had come.

Buffalo Bill and the other two then mounted and rode back toward Robbers' Run, for there they must meet their comrades who were patrolling that part of the runs and perhaps find some clew to the man who had robbed Horseshoe Ned of the fort sutler's money.

Robbers' Run was in about the wildest part of the trail, and situated in a deep canyon between two lofty ranges.

It was a cut-off in good weather, but in the rainy season the "run" was a foaming river and the drive that way could not be made.

The Run had been the retreat of a band of outlaws at one time, and so gained its name of Robbers' Run, though never before had there been known a coach to be held up there.

When Buffalo Bill and his two scouts with him reached Robbers' Run they found there the five men under Texas Jack, whom Four-in-hand Frank had met and sent to the spot according to orders.

Soon after they had gone into camp the four from toward the post, informed by Horseshoe Ned put in an appearance.

These completed the fifteen scouts, including Buffalo Bill, who were stationed on the three trails so as to be within easy call, and from one to the other of which the chief of scouts went as he deemed necessary.

By so placing his men, having them each patrol some thirty miles of their respective coach trails, and going from one party to the other, Buffalo Bill hoped to at last catch the masked outlaw, be he Silk Lasso Sam or not.

The moment that he reached the Robbers' Run the chief of scouts looked over the situation.

There was the trail of the outlaw's horse, and it came down the run, and out of the bed of the shallow stream.

It had also gone back that way, entering the stream at the same place it left it, and what led the scout to feel that it was the same man who had held up Four-in-hand Frank, was that the trail came from toward the range into the stream, and returned that way.

The next thing to do was to find where else the trail had entered and left the little stream.

It was nearly camping time, but leaving one man in camp to prepare supper, all the others were put upon the hunt for the trail. Some went on horseback, some on foot.

A number went up the stream and the rest went down it, the chief going with the latter party.

But just after sunset the men began to straggle into camp.

They came mostly alone, and they all had the same story to tell, which was that no trail could be found where it entered or left the stream.

Buffalo Bill was the last to come in and he too admitted failure, as he remarked:

"That masked outlaw must be Silk Lasso Sam, for he is a wonder, and can cover up his tracks better than a red-skin can."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE COURIER.

THE hope of Buffalo Bill was that the three scouts sent to the Paint Branch had found the trail of the man who had held up Four-in-hand Frank's coach, and would follow it on up to Robbers' Run.

That the two coaches had been robbed by the same man was the belief of all the scouts.

The night passed away and the scouts

took the trail the next morning with the same result however.

The three men sent to Paint Branch came in at noon with the others, and they had nothing gratifying to report.

They had found the trail at Paint Branch, leading from and into the water.

But further than this they had made no discovery.

They had searched thoroughly, up and down the stream for miles, but without result, and had come to where no horse could go up or down further in the water, yet there was no trace on the banks to show where one had gone into it or left it.

Hence they had come to the Robbers' Run as ordered.

As the coaches were both at rest and not on the trails East or West, they were in no danger and so Buffalo Bill felt that he could devote his whole time and force for several days to searching for the outlaw, or outlaws as the case might be.

He wondered at the non-arrival of the Surgeon Scout, who was always so punctual.

Could the surgeon be away from the fort, or ill, he thought?

But in such a case, after his earnest request of Colonel Dunwoody for the services of his officer comrade, would not a courier have been sent to him with word of some kind?

Buffalo Bill was in a quandary as to just what to do, when he heard a cheer from his men and a courier dashed into camp.

He had a letter from the colonel to Buffalo Bill, and another, which he said was to be sent on to the nearest station and mailed.

The letter from the colonel was as follows:

"DEAR CODY:—

"Horseshoe Ned brought in last night your message, and told his story of having been held up, and that Frank, the Pocket City driver, had also been halted, presumably by the same man.

"Ned's coach had a break-down, so he was delayed a couple of hours, coming in just as help was starting to him.

"Surgeon Powell started yesterday for Pocket City, so will learn all the news regarding the mysterious disappearance of the miner Dean, and will doubtless return at once to the fort.

"For fear he might not do so, I sent Wild Bill last night to Pocket City to find him, and have him go via the coach trail from Yellow Dust Valley, to join you at Robbers' Run, as requested.

"I have written the letter to Miss Leigh, as you suggested, and send it by this courier, to mail at nearest mailing station.

"I have told her that it is believed that the masked outlaw, who robbed her, and has since pretty regularly held up the coaches, is Silk Lasso Sam, and that she must not censure any of us if he is killed, or if captured, quickly put to death.

"I have also told her of the unaccountable disappearance of Deadshot Dean, and hinted that which may not have occurred to you, that perhaps the masked outlaw has done away with him.

"I feel that you are doing all in your power to capture this man, and are going the right way about it, by your persistent hanging upon the trails.

"There is an odd old character here who came in on Horseshoe Ned's coach, some runs ago, and who is Colonel De Suro's guest.

"He is called the Ancient Sport at the Officers' Club, has white hair, dresses like a dandy, and devotes himself to the ladies, while he will persist in taking long rides on horseback alone, or with company if he can get it.

"He is very rich, and wears jewels amounting to a small fortune, so keep an eye as close to the fort as possible, as if he was taken by the masked outlaw he could be bled for a very large sum.

"I trust Powell will be with you soon after my courier arrives, and I know well what you two are worth, once you put your heads together on a trail.

"I have just ordered the commissary to send you ample stores, and a score of fresh horses will go along, too, for those of your men who may need to make a change of mounts.

"Send the courier at once on, and let me have word by him of what has been done, when he returns by your camp.

"Wishing you success,
Yours,
DUNWOODY."

The scout told the courier just where to go, after he had read this letter, and as he had ridden hard gave him a fresh horse and ordered him to push on and catch the coach that left the Junction station with the mail on the next morning.

Hardly had the courier departed when the scouts gave another cheer, and looking up quickly Buffalo Bill saw the Surgeon Scout ride into camp, and he was not alone, either.

CHAPTER L.

FRANK POWELL'S OPINION OF GHOSTS.

JUDGE SCOTT KING, the Vigilante captain, had decided that it would be a good thing to let the news of Deadshot Dean's disappearance be known to Surgeon Powell.

He had accordingly chartered a hanger-on

about the mines to take a letter to Pioneer Post and deliver it into the hand of the Surgeon Scout.

It was this letter which had caused Frank Powell to set off at once for Yellow Dust Valley, and not sparing his horse he had gone there in rapid time.

After an interview with the "judge," he had, having asked many questions, and studied the case pretty thoroughly, come to his own conclusion in the matter, and which he expressed to Scott King as follows:

"The miner may, or may not be dead; but my opinion is that the masked outlaw has to do with his disappearance."

"The masked outlaw, surgeon?"

"Yes."

"I don't see how."

"Why, not?"

"It's the men who hated him in Yellow Dust Valley."

"It may be, but why not the masked outlaw who also had reason to hate him, and to do away with him too?"

"One man could hardly get away with Deadshot Dean, doctor."

"I have had the same opinion of some men, and found myself deceived, for treachery and ambush can kill the strongest of men."

"You are right there, sir."

"Now, I happen to know that there is the best of reason for believing that this outlaw went to the home of Deadshot Dean, and he went there prepared to act threateningly if need be.

"Perhaps he may have had Cast Iron Bill and his gang as allies, for he does not care to play a lone hand in the work he is doing."

"That's so, sir, but I hardly thought of them as the allies of the outlaw."

"Yet, Cast Iron Bill bears upon the back of his right hand the brand of Buffalo Bill, and it stamps him as an outlaw, for he was found among Silk Lasso Sam's men at his retreat, but escaped as he claimed to be a prisoner of the outlaws.

"Now if caught in any other work he will quickly suffer for it, wearing that brand as he does, for you remember he was the ring-leader of the attack upon Deadshot Dean's cabin."

"So he was, sir."

"And if the outlaw comrade, or spy, of Silk Lasso Sam before he was captured, why not afterward, for you know that the chief came here after his escape?"

"Very true, sir."

"So I say that he is the ally of Silk Lasso Sam, or of this masked outlaw, be he whom he may.

"I happen to know how to enter the cabin of Deadshot Dean, for he showed me the secret, and I will go there and see just how matters look, as regards his intentional going away or not, though I believe that it was intentional, and furthermore my opinion is that he is not dead but a prisoner."

"I hope so, for then we can hope to see him again."

"I will go to his cabin to-night, remain there, and take the trail on the morrow, and follow it to the end."

"You are the man to find the end, Surgeon Powell, once you start on it.

"But stay to supper here to-night with me, and go on later to the miner's cabin; that is—" and the judge paused.

"Well, judge?"

"That is—" and the judge looked confused.

"You appear to wish to say something, judge, and yet feel a hesitancy about it."

"Well, you know, Surgeon Powell, Deadshot Dean is the only man in these parts who will go and come by the Hangman's Gulch after dark."

"Ah!"

"He is the only miner who lives beyond the line of cabins in Pocket City in that direction, and on account of its bad name, that it is haunted, no one cares to go by there after sunset, and in fact they shun it, most of them, by sunlight, too, and I thought maybe you would not wish to go either."

"Do not worry on that account, judge, for in the first place I am a doctor, and don't believe in ghosts."

"Don't doctors believe in them, for if so I wish I was a doctor, as I've tried hard not to be superstitious."

"Try harder and you will not be.

"Now, a doctor, you know, cuts a man all to pieces after death in the study of his profession, and that hardens them to the belief that the dead anatomy can ever appear in life again, and in life it must appear to be a ghost, for what is spirit form but life?"

"I see."

"I cannot believe that, once dead, we can roam this earth again in spirit form, and hence alleged ghosts have no terror for me."

"I have seen too many men die—have, I regret to say, been forced to send into eternity too many men to believe that they can reappear again except in haunting memories."

"No, judge, I'll go through Hangman's Gulch without a quickening of the pulse, and if I see a ghost I'll guarantee to capture it and make you a present of it, for there's a fortune in taking it East and exhibiting it."

"Well, doctor, I wish I could feel as you do; but come to supper with me, and to-night you can go on to the cabin of Deadshot Dean, and Doctor—"

"Well, judge."

"I hope you will catch a ghost, for there's millions in it, as you say," whispered the judge.

CHAPTER LI.

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH.

SURGEON POWELL enjoyed his supper at The Frying Pan, and a cigar after it.

His horse had a rest and was well-cared for, and later on he mounted and rode away for the cabin of the miner, Deadshot Dean.

The judge saw him ride away with many misgivings, in spite of his assertion that he had no fear of spooks, and the supernatural in general, as he said:

"They knew Deadshot wasn't afraid of them, and got used to him; but I guess the doctor will see them, and if he does catch me one then I take him East to show him."

The judge promised to ride over to the cabin after sun-up, and see if the doctor had made any discoveries.

The surgeon meanwhile had ridden quietly on his way toward the cabin of Deadshot Dean.

Those who saw him leaving the camps at night and going toward Hangman's Gulch, wondered at his temerity and shook their heads ominously.

He passed on until he came to Hangman's Gulch and boldly rode in.

Pausing by the gallows he sat upon his horse gazing about him silently, and as his eyes rested upon the graves of the dead, and they were many who had perished there at the rope's end, he murmured to himself.

"How strange it is that we can hold fear of the dead, that they should shun this spot, save for the fact that criminals alone lay buried here."

"Now I could lie down upon that gallows, fold my blanket around me, and sleep as sweetly as though I were in my quarters in the fort."

"Why, the dead never disturb me as the living do."

He turned his horse and rode slowly out of Hangman's Gulch, and then on to the cabin.

He staked his horse out near, then went to the door and went to the hiding place where the miner had shown him and Buffalo Bill, where he would put a duplicate key to the padlock.

It was there, and he opened the lock and then carried out the instructions given him to open the door.

A hidden string drawn upon raised the bar that crossed the door within, and then he had free entrance.

Lighting a match he soon had a lamp lit, and closing the door looked about him.

There was no indication that the miner had intended to leave the cabin.

His clothes were there, save those he had on when he left, his new repeating-rifle was hung on the wall, and his belt of arms was there, though of course he was supposed to have that on, about his waist.

"That looks bad, as though he had been caught without his weapons."

"I have not forgotten his letter in his pocketbook, making an appointment here with Silk Lasso Sam, and hoping thus to catch him, or kill him."

"Both Buffalo Bill and myself warned

him that it would be best for one of us to remain here with him, and aid in the capture, and the result is he has been caught at a disadvantage.

"Now, to find out what has become of him, and Buffalo Bill must help me do this, for Colonel Dean is too noble a fellow to desert when he needs our aid."

The Surgeon Scout now made himself comfortable for the night, slept soundly until daybreak, then went out, led his horse to water, and staked him in a fresh pasturage, when he returned and built a fire to get his breakfast.

He had no difficulty in finding plenty of food, and had just finished his breakfast of coffee, crackers and broiled bacon, when up rode the judge.

"Ho, judge, did you see any ghosts as you came by Hangman's Gulch this morning?"

"No, doctor, but the place looked awful damp, dismal and weird."

"Did you see any last night?"

"Sorry to say I did not, sir."

"You got into the cabin all right, I see."

"Oh, yes, and all I can discover is that whoever came here surprised Deadshot Dean unarmed, and so got the advantage of him."

"That's about it, for if he had not been surprised there would have been some dead-ers around to show for it."

"Yes, and if killed, his body would have been found."

"But I'm not alone, doctor, for there's a courier here from the fort, and he's hitching the horses."

"A courier?" and the Surgeon Scout stepped forward and greeted the messenger, who handed him a letter from Colonel Dunwoody, the contents of which the reader is aware of through the letter to Buffalo Bill.

"Ah! Four-in-hand Frank was held up on his run out, judge, and Horseshoe Ned on his run in, and I have instructions to go and join Buffalo Bill at Robbers' Run, so I will start at once."

Ten minutes after the Surgeon Scout was following the stage trail, and about noon reached Paint Branch.

He had just ridden out of the water when there came the sharp crack of a rifle from ambush and reeling in his saddle Surgeon Powell fell heavily to the ground as his horse gave a spring forward, startled at the shot.

CHAPTER LII.

UNMASKED.

THE shot from ambush, the puff of smoke revealed, came from over the top of a boulder on the side of the hill sloping down to Paint Branch.

Hardly had the Surgeon Scout fallen from his saddle when a man's form appeared standing on top of the boulder, his rifle held in hand; the muzzle still smoking.

The man was very stout of frame, his face was masked, and in fact he was none other than the mysterious outlaw accused of being Silk Lasso Sam.

He saw the Surgeon Scout writhe as though in agony, give a convulsive movement and then lie motionless.

"That fixed him."

"I took dead sure aim and knew it would, though knowing who he was my hand was a little trickery toward me, as not to kill meant a fight for life for me."

"Yes, he's dead, and I'll see what it sums up more than revenge, a horse and weapons," with this the masked outlaw walked toward the prostrate form of the Surgeon Scout.

On the way he started to catch the Surgeon's horse and had to run for his life, as the infuriated animal came dashing at him savagely, his ears laid back, teeth showing and eyes flashing.

The outlaw sprung into a thicket to save his life, and also because he did not wish to kill the horse, which was a splendid animal.

The horse followed him, his loose bridle-reins caught on the bushes and he was secured.

"The vicious devil!"

"Now I have him secure," said the outlaw, and making a flank movement he again approached the prostrate officer.

Bending over him he turned him upon his back, when suddenly the two hands flew up and he was seized in a grip of steel and dragged down upon the ground, while, with a wonderfully active movement the Surgeon Scout wheeled himself upon top of his foe and had him wholly at his mercy.

A quick blow in the face partially dazed him, then a grip was caught upon his throat with one hand, while the other drew and thrust a revolver into his masked face.

"Surrender, or die!" was the stern command.

"I does."

The weapons of the man were then taken from him and he was searched for others that might be hidden about him.

But nothing more than his belt of arms and rifle were found.

Then the Surgeon Scout drew his mask quickly from his face.

With it came a false beard, and then a face was revealed that only a villain could possess.

"Who are you?"

"Nobody."

"Well, you soon will be."

"Why?"

"I think you will be hanged in just about three days."

"What fer?"

"Because you deserve it."

"What has I done?"

"You fired from ambush at an officer of the army in discharge of his duty."

"I wish I had kilt yer."

"You came very near it, for your bullet grazed my head, and fearing a second shot, I dropped from my horse and played 'possum."

"I thought you was a outlaw I was a-hunting fer."

"Well, you are an outlaw I was hunting for, as you are the man who held up Four-in-hand Frank's coach in its outward run."

"Tain't no such thing."

"Oh, yes, and you are the man whom we have supposed was Silk Lasso Sam in disguise."

"I hain't."

"Yes, and you have a very good grip, for I know you, having heard you called Grip Saunders at Pocket City, when I was there."

"I hain't."

"Oh, yes you are, for I know your face, though with all this wadding on and extra clothing, you have made a regular Barnum's fat man of yourself."

"Why did you do this?"

"I was cold."

"You'll be still colder soon."

"Don't talk that-a-way, pard, 'cause it makes chills chase up and down my back."

"With all that clothing on, you have chills?"

"Hain't yer goin' ter let me go?"

"When you get to the end of your rope, yes."

"Now I'll see if I can find a letter I was told the coach was robbed of."

The search quickly revealed the letter to Bonnie Belle the mail-bag had been robbed of.

"I want no further proof."

"Where is your horse?"

"I hain't got none."

"That I shall see, when I have left you in the keeping of mine."

"Oh, don't, for I has a horse."

"Where is he?"

"Over yonder behind the rocks."

"We'll find him."

The Surgeon Scout now went to his own horse and taking his lariat quickly bound his prisoner.

The horse eyed the man viciously, but considered him in safe keeping, for he did not attack him as the outlaw feared he would.

"Stand there, sir."

"Now, Lucifer, watch and if he attempts to bolt, you know what to do."

Then the scout left and soon returned from among the rocks with the horse of the prisoner.

He was a fine large blood bay animal.

The man then mounted upon his own horse, and Surgeon Powell said:

"Now, Grip Saunders, we will go and find Buffalo Bill."

"Oh, Lordy," groaned the prisoner and he turned a shade whiter than he was.

CHAPTER LIII.

A MAN TO BRAND.

WHEN Surgeon Powell rode into Buffalo Bill's camp of scouts at Robbers' Run, he was greeted with a shout of welcome.

This quickly was changed into shouts of triumph as he was seen to be accompanied by a stranger.

For the first time in his life Buffalo Bill felt a pang of envy, when he saw that the stranger was a prisoner, was mounted upon a large blood-bay horse and wore a mask, beneath the skirt of which a beard was visible.

He was also dressed as it was always reported the masked outlaw had been, and apparently a fat man.

"Well, Frank, you've got him, I see, and I envy you," said Buffalo Bill, holding out his hand to his friend.

"I've got this one, yes, Bill, but he gave me a close call, for do you see this cut on my hat, within half an inch of my temple?"

"Yes."

"That is where his bullet cut, and I dropped from the saddle and played dead."

"Good!"

"Where was it?"

"At Paint Branch."

"You got word from the colonel then?"

"Yes, to come on here and join you."

"I needed your aid, and I've got it, I see."

"To a limited extent, yes."

"To a very large extent, for you have captured the masked outlaw."

"One of him."

"What do you mean?"

"I've a notion I have only caught a fourth of him."

"He's large enough for two anyhow."

"That is not healthy fat, Bill, see!"

With this the Surgeon Scout drove the point of his knife into the clothes of his prisoner.

"It would take a couple of inches deeper to touch real flesh."

"Made up, as sure as sin."

"Yes, and he is sin."

"Who is he?"

"I'll see if you remember him?"

The mask and false beard were removed and the pallid face was revealed.

"I have seen him before, Doc."

"At Pocket City?"

"Yes."

"And elsewhere?"

"Where?"

"He was one of Captain Caruth's troop when we were stationed at Fort Roule, and because I said he was playing sick, when we went on an Indian trail, he afterward tried to kill me, and failing, deserted."

"I hain't the man," said the prisoner.

"Oh, yes you are, for I recall you now," Buffalo Bill remarked.

"Yes, and in the mines he is known as Grip Saunders, on account of his strength."

"And he ambushed you Doc?"

"He did."

"I tuk him fer a man as was lookin' fer me ter kill me," growled the man.

"Well, you were not far wrong, for I was looking for you to kill you, and though I did not do so when I could have shot you down, for you believed me to be dead, the chances are that you will hang, if we get you to the fort, and if I took you back to Pocket City Judge King would be sure to turn you over to the Vigilantes."

"Don't take me thar, I begs you."

"Well, we know you for what you are, for Bill, here is the letter which Colonel Dunwoody wrote me had been taken from the mail-bag, and which was addressed to Bonnie Belle."

"That hangs him," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he took the letter and glanced at it.

Then he said:

"Hold out your right hand, sir—there!"

The man did so, not knowing what the scout was doing, when he took a small bottle from his pocket and a stamp.

Quick as a flash the brand of B. B., with the liquid upon it, was pressed down upon the man's hand, and the outlaw started back with a cry of alarm.

"You need not be alarmed, for save for a slight smarting it will not harm you, and yet if you live a hundred years you will wear my brand."

"Your brand?" gasped the man, glancing at the red letters upon his hand.

"Yes, I have branded you for future reference."

"Ha! I've seen that brand before, and—"
But the man stopped suddenly:

"Well, sir."

"I hain't nothin' ter say."

"Where have you seen that brand before?" Surgeon Powell asked.

The man made no reply.

"Will you not answer?"

"I won't say nothin'," was the dogged reply.

"Bill?"

"Yes, Doc."

"Do you notice that this man is not Silk Lasso Sam?"

"I do, and we were mistaken in believing him to be Silk Lasso Sam."

"Yes, him especially; but you observe that Bonnie Belle's letter is not opened?"

"That is so, Frank."

"This proves, as he has had it in his possession for some time, that he serves a master."

"You are right, by great Cæsar's Ghost!" quickly said Buffalo Bill.

"Another thing."

"Yes, Doc."

"He started to say that he had seen that brand before."

"So he did."

"It is on the man you branded at the fort, the man who led the attack on Deadshot Dean's cabin."

"You are right."

"That man was Cast Iron Bill, and he, with this man, Grip Saunders, are missing in the mines and are wanted there."

"Now I want to know what this man knows, or back to the mines he will go," and the words of the Surgeon Scout brought a groan of despair from the prisoner.

CHAPTER LIV.

OFFERED TERMS.

BUFFALO BILL saw that Surgeon Powell had struck the keynote, and as he wanted to speak with him privately, he called to Texas Jack to lead the prisoner away and motioned to the doctor to accompany him apart from the others.

"Doc, I am sure that you are on the right trail."

"I think so, Bill."

"Now let me tell you just what has occurred and what I have done, or rather not done, for to find the trail of that outlaw prisoner of yours, away from Paint Branch my men could not do, any more than we all could find it to and from Robbers' Run."

"Do I understand you to say, Bill, that you believe this man, who robbed Frank's coach up the trail, to be the one who also held up Horseshoe Ned?"

"Certainly."

"Why do you think so?"

"From what Horseshoe Ned said, and now that I see the man."

"He is not the same man, Bill."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"What reason have you, for he is his counterpart?"

"True, dressed like him, and made to look the fat man as he does."

"True, and with the same horse."

"Or one like him."

"No, Bill, they are different men."

"But Cast Iron Bill and his pard only lately left the mines."

"That may be, but as Cast Iron Bill was the ally of Silk Lasso Sam before, why not again, and why, when crowded upon every trail, as you have crowded the outlaw chief, why should he not be anxious to have help, to seek allies?"

"I see now what you are after, that Silk Lasso Sam is really on the trails and has others as allies."

"Yes."

"Disguised, masked and mounted as he is?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I am sure now that you are right, Doc."

"I feel that I am."

"Then we must find Silk Lasso Sam and his allies."

"We have the means to do it, Bill."

"In this man?"

"Yes."

"You think he will tell?"

"We can frighten him into caring for himself by betraying the others."

"That is just what we must do, and can do, I believe."

"Yes, and you will find that Silk Lasso Sam disguised himself as this man is, when he robbed his sister, not willing to be recognized by her after his pledges."

"That is it, doubtless."

"Having fared so well in robbing her he started out to get more money and struck coaches on the different trails, until he at last decided to have help, and so pressed into his service some of his old allies, and this man is one of them."

"That is my theory, Bill."

"And I agree with you perfectly, Doc, for it is just about as it is, and our plan is to begin work upon this man."

"Yes, and lose no time at it."

"I'll send for him."

With this Buffalo Bill called Texas Jack to bring the prisoner to him, and as Surgeon Powell told him to do the questioning he said:

"We have been talking over your case, Grip Saunders."

"Yes, trying to hang me without a trial, I guesses."

"No, for you have already been tried for shooting at an officer, with intent to kill, and desertion from the army, and now we have the proof, of finding a letter upon you, that you robbed the United States Mail, fired from ambush upon Surgeon Powell and were captured in the mask and disguise of the outlaw road-agent that has been holding up the coaches of late."

"I has been in Pocket City until a few days ago."

"That may help you in one particular, yet we have proof of others crimes that will hang you, and my advice to you is that you make a clear breast of the whole affair and save your own life."

"I hain't nothin' ter tell."

"You might tell who your chief is, how you came to put on this disguise, and how you came to take that letter from the mails."

"I hain't nothing ter say," was the dogged response of the man.

"Well, we do not wish you to talk until you have considered what you may have to say."

"You are a useless specimen of humanity, and your fate is assured, but there may be a chance for you to save your neck while others stretch."

"We happen to know that you are not the leader, that you have a master, and he is the one we wish to catch and will."

"We can, in time, catch him unaided by you, yet if you desire to expedite matters it is for you to say so, and I'll give you time to consider."

"What does yer wish ter know?"

"I wish to know who your master is and where he is."

"I hain't no slave."

"Well, your leader, and in fact his followers."

"What does yer offer?"

"Your life."

"It ain't enough."

"What do you mean?"

"I is poor and might as well be dead as to go a beggar through life."

"All right, I leave you to your own thoughts of what you think best for you to do."

"Here, Jack, take him off and see that he does not escape," and the prisoner, who seemed anxious to talk more, was led away to the quarters of the scouts for safe-keeping.

CHAPTER LV.

THE DISGUISED OUTLAW.

THE conversation will be remembered which was held between the pretended old gentleman, Mayhew, and Nina De Sutro, when he revealed to the astonished girl just who he was.

Nina De Sutro was as hard hit as she had ever before been in her life.

She was white as death, and glared at the man with a look that showed how she longed to be able to kill him then and there.

"Yes," she at last said between her teeth.

"You are Silk Lasso Sam."

"I am."

"You are the outlaw, the murderer—yes, all that is vile and bad?"

"I am."

"You are the one, saved from the gallows by your clever and noble sister, who broke your pledge to her and remained here to again become an outlaw?"

"I am."

"You are the man who saved my life, dragged me from the Rio Grande, and then winning my admiration, my love, inveigled me into a secret marriage—"

"Which was no marriage, but a mock one."

She turned savagely upon him now, and hissed forth:

"You lie there, for though you frightened me into swearing to rescue you from prison here, swearing that the marriage was a mock one, I remembered afterward that it was real, in a church, by a priest, and I have the certificate he gave me."

"Oh, no, my memory played me false for awhile, but that was all, for now I know that I am your legal wife, though I would rather die than have to confess it."

"Yes, I would rather die."

"You do not wish me to make it known, then?"

"No, a thousand times, no!"

"It would brand me here as false in every respect, and ruin my every ambition in life, for here all believe me to be Nina De Sutro, a young girl."

"No, no, you must not, shall not do that."

"Then you must obey my will, Nina."

"Curses upon you, thing in the shape of a man."

"See! you came here before in disguise, and deceived every one, and I was obliged, for my own sake, not to betray you."

"Now, when there is a big reward on your head, dead or alive, when you have gone, as your poor sister supposed, far away, to keep your pledge to her for aiding you to escape the gallows, taking advantage of what I had told you in the past, of Carter Mayhew, my father's partner, who went to South America, and had in his possession papers which would bring me a large fortune, you, with the refinement of your deviltry, which you have reduced to a science, returned here."

"You came back as Carter Mayhew, arrayed in your jewels, dressed as an old sport, with a false hump on your back, a stoop in your shoulders, gold-rimmed spectacles, a snow-white wig of curling hair, your face stained as dark as a Mexican's, bending on your gold-headed cane, the very image of an old man."

"No make-up on the stage could be as complete, or perfect, and no finished actor could play his part better, for even your voice has the tremor of old age."

"You flatter me."

"I shall become vain under all this praise from your lips, Nina, my dear wife."

"Bah! you disgust me to call me by that sacred name."

"If I flatter you it is deserved, for you are the most finished scoundrel I ever heard of."

"Thanks, Nina."

"Now I ask you what is going to be the ending of all this, the result of your coming here, other than my total destruction?"

"I do not see how it will affect you."

"Are you not the guest of my adopted father and guardian, Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro?"

"Yes."

"And you have come for deviltry?"

"I have come for money."

"Then I will give you all I can and let you go."

"What you can give me is not to be taken into consideration."

"What then?"

"How much can you give me?"

"A thousand dollars, or so, for you got from me all I could spare when you were a prisoner here before, yes, and I hurt myself and nearly got into trouble from going to see you."

"A thousand dollars, you said?"

"Yes."

"Why, girl, I have five times that sum in jewels about me, and I had ten thousand in money when my sister gave me as much more at the time she rescued me."

"Yes, and you stole her jewels and as much more money when you held up the coach in which she was a passenger on her way home."

"Who said I did?"

"I say so."

"Can you prove it?"

"I know that your disguises are wonderful, and you are Silk Lasso Sam, and you are therefore none other than the masked outlaw of the Overland whom all fear so."

"Then if you know this, be warned and give me the aid I demand, for I have come here to better my fortunes by many thousands of dollars, and then go my way to where I can enjoy my life free of deadly peril each day."

CHAPTER LXI.

THE DEMAND.

"I MUST know all that you demand."

"First tell me," said the outlaw, very quietly:

"Have you looked over your accounts with Colonel De Sutro?"

"What do you mean?"

"You will be of age very soon?"

"Yes."

"Then you are to have your fortune turned over to your keeping, by the terms of the will?"

"I am."

"You were left some three hundred thousand dollars?"

"Just that."

"The legal interest on that sum would bring in, in the eight years the colonel has handled it, say about fifty thousand dollars."

"Well?"

"How much have you had?"

"I have had on an average two thousand a year, for as a girl I got less of course for my needs."

"Yes, I have had in all twenty thousand dollars."

"And the balance of interest?"

"I remember that Colonel De Sutro told me that he had in interest some thirty thousand to turn over to me, above my principal and expenditures."

"Then you consider that correct?"

"I do, and is it not?"

"Well, yes, in law, but not morally."

"What do you know about morals?"

"Everything, though I possess none."

"Well, what about this inheritance, which I believe you are trying to make me believe my guardian is defrauding me out of?"

"Nothing of the kind, for he will turn over to you your three hundred thousand dollars and your interest."

"What do you mean then?"

"I mean that he has the handling of the money, and though giving all to you back again, he has invested sums that have paid him well, has lent money out at a large interest, and hence has made, in the eight years' use of your money, a large fortune, half the amount of yours, for himself."

"Now I want you to get from him ten thousand dollars, as a gift to me from you, a parting gift, for I never shall see you again."

"So you said before."

"You will still have twenty thousand interest money and your fortune besides, and I need what you will give me."

"And you will go then?"

"That is your gift to me remember."

"What else do you demand?"

"You hate Miss Clarice Carr?"

"I do not love her."

"Well, with a woman that is equivalent to hate."

"What then?"

"She is very rich and can command big money if need be."

"If she has none here, the paymaster, under the colonel's order, will pay it, and I shall place her ransom at twenty thousand dollars."

"You name large sums."

"Yes, for I intend to fly high when I get to a foreign land."

"I have already won a few thousands in money since I have been here, and shall take in much more, for I will have a game with young Turpin, who thinks he plays well, and with Caruth, another expert with the cards."

"I shall also get a few thousands out of

Colonel De Sutro, so I will pick up all of ten thousand in the fort, and with the ransom of the beautiful Carr and your money, along with what I have, I will be able to get out of the country with quite a handsome sum."

"Then you are going to make this demand upon me to aid you in your infamous robberies?"

"Of course."

"I believe that you play with marked cards."

"Why, of course I do."

"Do you believe for a moment I would take chances of losing?"

"I shall tell the gentlemen you named not to play with you."

"Oh, yes, you will protect the men from being robbed, yet let me rob the sweet Carr of a large ransom."

"Now, is not that the woman of it?"

"Well, I will not see any of my friends robbed by you."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Nina, and compromise yourself as well."

"How do you mean?"

"I am Mr. Carter Mayhew, your father's dear friend, and I am here to place a fortune in your hands, remember."

"Then, too, I am the honored guest of your guardian, Colonel De Sutro, and my story about the papers I hold for you to get a fortune, is known and has been told all around by the colonel, his wife and yourself."

"You certainly cannot advise your friends not to play with such a dear old friend of the family, your benefactor in truth."

"Oh! how I wish the lightning would strike you!"

"It has, and it is said that the lightning never strikes twice in the same place."

"I could kill you without the slightest qualm of conscience."

"I do not doubt it, and I am not one to go unprotected, so I will watch you closely, expecting foul play upon your part."

"Have you any other demands to make of me?" she said almost savagely.

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"You are outwardly friendly with Miss Carr?"

"Yes."

"You can ask her to go with you for a ride."

"Why?"

"Well, that is my plot."

"What plot?"

"You are to go with her for a ride, and I am to happen to join you and go as an escort."

"Well?"

"We are to take a certain trail."

"Yes."

"And we are to run into a trap."

"What kind of a trap?"

"My horse is to be shot under me, for I shall ride so as to have it that way without danger to yourself or Miss Carr."

"And then?"

"Your horses are to be caught with a lariat."

"Yes."

"And the three of us are to be made prisoners."

"I see."

"And by your men?"

"Of course."

"And then?"

"Owing to my years, I will be permitted to go, under solemn oath not to reveal any secret of the outlaws, or betray them, to get money for ransom."

"Then it is that your guardian must put up ten thousand for you, and I can borrow that sum, on my check, as it were, for myself, while, as the outlaws will assert that Miss Carr is very wealthy, the major will have to send twenty thousand for her."

"Armed with this money I will return to the robbers' retreat, secure the release of you ladies and myself, and returning to the fort with you, soon after take my departure."

"After I am gone you can decide with your guardian and Mrs. De Sutro, whether you will let it be known that I am really Mayhew, or an old fraud."

CHAPTER LVII.

TWO SCHEMES.

The scouts all felt that they had come to a climax in the situation.

They had captured a masked outlaw.

He was the one who had robbed Four-in-hand Frank's coach, there was no doubt of that.

But was he the man who had robbed Horseshoe Ned's coach?

Was he the man who had robbed Bonnie Belle?

Was he the one who had committed all of these robberies, or were there more of these masked outlaws?

If there were more, then they all were dressed as fat men, all rode a blood-bay horse, brought a coach to a halt with a rifle instead of a revolver, and therefore there was a band of outlaws instead of one.

Were these men under the leadership of Silk Lasso Sam?

Or was Silk Lasso Sam really gone out of the country?

These questions the scouts discussed among themselves in their camps, and waited to see what their leaders would do.

They were delighted to have Surgeon Frank Powell with their chief, for they knew his value as an ally.

Could the prisoner be made to tell the truth, and thus clear the mystery of the masked outlaw or outlaws?

While the scouts were discussing the situation, Dr. Powell and Buffalo Bill were in close conversation together.

"Well, Doc, do you think he will come around?" asked Cody, when the two were alone together.

"That depends upon how much hope he has of a rescue."

"You mean that he looks for one?"

"Well, I believe that Silk Lasso Sam is at the bottom of this band, and he has as allies no less than five, and perhaps double that number."

"They have been divided pretty much as your scouts have been, on the different trails, with one to act as the masked outlaw."

"Well?"

"This man we have has not seen his chief, or reported to him in any way since the holding up of Frank's coach, for he has Bonnie Belle's letter, and it is unopened."

"Other letters the fellow opened, looking for money, so that shows that he was told to get this letter to Bonnie Belle from the judge, telling of the miner Dean's disappearance and that Silk Lasso Sam was surely again upon the war-trail for gold."

"Now who but Silk Lasso Sam, her brother, could be interested in this letter going to Bonnie Belle?"

"That is so."

"He alone wished her not to know that he was again at his old tricks, and yet, if he was caught she would be the first one he sent to for aid."

"Beyond a doubt."

"Oh, yes, he would look for her to aid him again."

"And she would."

"She might be prevailed upon to try, but this time we could thwart her, Bill, and at the same time prevent Colonel Dunwoody from having to sign that man's death sentence, for he really loves the girl, and such an act would part them, for he would do his duty though the stars should fall."

"Yes, that is just what the colonel would do, for he would sacrifice himself for his duty."

"Yes, and this we must prevent, for the girl, I believe, really loves our gallant colonel."

"And I do not blame her, for he is a man among men."

"He is, indeed; but now, Bill, for action."

"What is your plan, Doc?"

"In the first place you have fourteen men with you?"

"Yes, with you, we are sixteen."

"There are now four trails to watch?"

"If you take all, yes."

"And then Pocket City must be provided for."

"You think so?"

"Yes, if only for couriers."

"Then, Doc—"

"You can send three men to each one of the trails, two to Pocket City, that make up the fourteen, and we will circulate, keeping the prisoner with us."

"Good!"

"In this way we will be able to guard the

trails, have men at Pocket City for use, and we can be on hand for a flight from point to point.

"When this fellow peaches, as he may be made to do, then we can go to the point where we will have to act, and having a rendezvous here at Robbers' Run, which is most convenient, the men can report to us once in every twenty-four hours."

"That is a good plan, though it implies that you do not believe the prisoner can be made to talk."

"That is to be seen."

"In the first place, he knows that as Government officers we dare not hang him without a trial."

"If we take him to the fort he stands a chance for weeks before his trial, and he cannot be condemned to death, as we have no proof of actual murder against him."

"That is so."

"He could be sent to prison, and that is all."

"His life would be safe, and he would always feel that he could escape."

"True."

"Now, these things may prevent his betraying his comrades, while waiting and hoping for a rescue."

"Yes."

"But if we can scare him into the idea that we will give him up to Judge Scott King and his Vigilantes, which you know we dare not do, then we may get from him the information that may lead to the capture of the others."

"That is the way I now see it, Frank, though I did not do so before."

"You see I was hoping that we could scare him into a confession by threatening to hang him."

"That he knows as well as we do, that we would not dare do, and he would hold out."

"I believe you are right; but could not the men, in our absence, pretend to intend to hang him?"

"It might have some effect, and if he will not talk for us, then we can try that game upon him."

"Let us have a talk with him at once, then, and if he refuses, pretend to go away, and give the boys a chance, for we ought to send the scouts to their forts as soon as possible."

"That is so."

"Send for him Bill, and you do the talking."

Ten minutes after the prisoner again confronted those whom he had every reason to fear.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE REFUSAL.

THE prisoner was again brought before the chief of scouts and his captor.

He looked anxious yet sullen, and glared at the red scar on his hand as though he could eat it out.

"That is only a blister now, Grip Saunders, and when it heals will be a pretty red mark, my brand," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, and some day it may be my chance to brand you, Buffalo Bill."

"It may be, but I doubt it."

"The fact is, outlaw Saunders, that there has been so much doubt raised as to who is and who is not an outlaw, that I am determined to stand it no longer, and every man I know to be one, I shall brand, so that when I see him again, I will know him."

"Now, should you escape, and be recaptured, I will be sure of you and can appear against you at a trial anywhere as one who wears my brand."

"Then too there is your friend Cast Iron Bill, for he wears my brand, and when we get him to the fort with you—"

"Get him to the fort?" yelled the startled prisoner.

"Yes, why not, for we shall get you there?"

"Is Cast Iron Bill a prisoner?"

"My dear Mr. Saunders, unless you take advantage of the offer we make you to tell where the balance of your comrades are—name them please, Surgeon Powell?"

"The original five allies of Silk Lasso Sam, who left Pocket City to join him," said Surgeon Powell, glancing at a paper as though reading, and looking as if he had all the facts

in the case, "were Cast Iron Bill who was leader."

"Then came Grip Saunders, Ugly Dan, Card Sharp Dave and Wild West Will."

"Now we have yet to account for Silk Lasso Sam, Wild West Will, Ugly Dan and Card Sharp Dave, for you know about Cast Iron Bill and the prisoner here, Cody."

The serious tone of the Surgeon Scout, and his referring to a paper, threw the prisoner off guard.

Buffalo Bill had made a clever play to cause the prisoner to believe that Cast Iron Bill was also their captive, and Surgeon Powell had cleverly carried out the belief.

They did not wish to tell a falsehood, they would not do that to gain an end, but they implied as much as that if Grip Saunders was not ready to make a confession, then Cast Iron Bill would be.

The prisoner looked very crestfallen as this thought came over him, that Cast Iron Bill might win the freedom now offered to him.

But he was determined to go about his plans very slowly, to act for himself and against his comrades, so he said:

"Waal, ef yer has Cast Iron Bill a prisoner why do you not get what you want ter know from him?"

"You have the prior claim, that is why," answered Cody.

"Will Cast Iron Bill come to terms?"

"Let me explain to you, Saunders, that we know that we have no death hold upon you, unless we turn you over to the Vigilantes of Gold Dust Valley."

"Which yer don't dare do, for I has been a soldier and I knows what yer dare do."

"Granted."

"But I say, as a deserter, and one who attempted the life of Surgeon Powell, also as a mail-robber, we could only try you for those crimes, which are punishable with imprisonment only."

"That's so."

"You see that I want you to understand fully the situation."

"I does."

"Now it is easier to offer you your pardon than it is to offer Cast Iron Bill his life, for you know what he is."

"He hain't no angel."

"True, and he is now under death sentence, and—"

"Is he?"

"Do you not know that he is?"

"I knows that he has had a hard life of it."

"Then we find it easier to offer you terms than Cast Iron Bill, and so we give you the chance to talk, or not, as you please."

"If you arranged with Cast Iron Bill you would have to give him his life?"

"Yes."

"And with me my freedom only?"

"Yes."

"And you would give Bill his freedom and his life if I did not pony up all I knows?"

"Yes."

"Then that would be giving him so much more than you does me. I want my freedom and gold in place of my life—see?"

They did see that the man was a very cunning schemer as well as a rascal.

The man leered at them as though to say that he held the winning card, and was well aware of the fact, so that they might as well show their hands.

The Surgeon Scout smiled under his mustache, and Buffalo Bill looked indifferent.

Then the scout asked:

"Well, granted that we do offer you terms, what do you wish?"

"My liberty and ten thousand dollars."

"We have no money to pay you that sum."

"You will get double that for the capture of Silk Lasso Sam alone, and a couple of thousand for each man of his band."

"Those were the figures for the old band."

"If he has escaped and has men with him, the rewards applies jist ther same, Pard Buffalo Bill."

"We did not ask the reward when we captured him before, and his band, too, for we do not take blood-money."

"The more fools you, for money is money, and the same that goes into the church, buys rum, and bribes folks to mean actions."

"I tell yer, it don't do ter kick ther bridge thet carries yer over ther stream 'cause it may be a leetle crooked."

"That is your outlaw creed, not ours, Saunders," said Surgeon Powell, sternly.

"Waal, ef we don't agree on creeds we kin on farms, so what does yer say ter them I offers?"

"We will give you your freedom, yes, and a thousand dollars, but no more," said Buffalo Bill, while Surgeon Powell added:

"Yes, Bill, we can safely promise that."

"Ten thousand and my liberty."

"No."

"I says yes."

"And I say no, most emphatically."

"What does you say, doctor?" and the man turned to Surgeon Powell.

"I can agree only to the thousand with Cody."

"Then yer gits no talk out o' me."

"You forget Cast Iron Bill."

"He won't sell out cheap, neither, and you'll find it so, when yer goes ter purchase him."

"We shall see."

"Now, doctor, shall we go and have a talk with Cast Iron Bill?" and Cody arose.

"Yes, Bill, for the sooner this matter is settled the better."

Buffalo Bill then called Texas Jack and said to him that the prisoner was left in his keeping, and they would be gone for some little while.

At the same time he slipped a paper into the hand of Texas Jack and the two mounted their horses and rode away, the prisoner appearing several times as though about to call them back, though he did not do so.

CHAPTER LIX.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

WHEN Texas Jack slipped off to himself and read the slip of paper, which had been given him by Buffalo Bill, he found it as follows:

"We can force the prisoner to no terms, for he knows, as Government officers, we dare not either hang him, or turn him over to Scott King's Vigilantes."

"When we are gone, upon some excuse, pretend that you intend to hang him, and only spare his life upon condition that he makes a clean confession of where his confederates in crime are, but under no circumstances do him the slightest injury."

Texas Jack read this over twice and then sought one of the scouts.

"Tom, Ribbons, who was killed by Silk Lasso Sam was your brother?"

"Yes, and I want ter see him hanged before I'll sleep well o' nights, Jack."

"Now read this, what Buffalo Bill has written me, and then you pretend the man is the one who killed your brother, Ribbons, the driver of the Overland, and call on the boys to help you hang him."

"I'll see the boys and we'll try and scare him into a confession, for he refuses to tell anything to Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill."

"All right, Jack, you see the boys and I'll do my part first-class," was the answer of Trailer Tom the scout.

Texas Jack gradually got around among the boys and told them his plan, and then gave the signal to Trailer Tom.

He soon after sauntered up to the prisoner and said:

"See here, hain't you Grip Saunders?"

"I is so called."

"Don't yer know me?"

"I does not."

"Don't I remind you of somebody?"

"Who?"

"Somebody you kilt?"

"I never kilt nobody."

"Oh yes you did."

"Who did I kill?"

"My brother."

"I never seen yer brother."

"Yer has."

"Who were he?"

"Ribbons."

"Ther driver on ther Pioneer Post Branch trail?"

"Yes."

"It were Silk Lasso Sam kilt him."

"Oh, no, you is ther man, and I has vowed to avenge my brother."

"Ho, pard, help me hang this feller, for I knows him now."

Quick as a flash he had cast the noose of his lariat over the neck of the prisoner, who

was securely bound, and the scouts came rushing toward the two.

Grip Saunders saw his danger at a glance, and he turned very pale as the scouts came toward him at a run.

"Pards, this is the man who kilt my poor brother Ribbons, showing him no mercy."

"I recognize him, and I say if he goes to ther fort then he gets a trial and maybe goes free."

"We kin hang him, then I'll put a bullet in him and say he tried to escape and I shot him, so that will be all the obituary he'll need."

"Pards, who's with me to string him up?"

A chorus of voices came in response, and a dozen hands grasped the other end of the lariat.

"Say, pards, Buffalo Bill left the man in my charge, and you must not do this," said Texas Jack coming forward.

"See here, Texas Jack, this hain't your play, and we is all ag'in' you, so stand one side and let us have this man."

"I'll protect him, Tom, as in duty bound."

Quickly half-a-dozen men threw themselves upon Texas Jack and he was bound hands and feet.

"Now, pards, up with the outlaw," cried Trailer Tom.

"You'll suffer for this," said the prisoner, now livid with fear.

"Not so much as you will."

"Hold on there, pards!"

It was Texas Jack who spoke.

"What is it, Jack?"

"That man has valuable information which Chief Cody wants to get from him, I am pretty certain, and if you hang him, then the trail's ended."

"Then he shall talk afore we hangs him, Jack."

"Now, Tom, you do not wish to stand in the way of us all getting the reward for capturing these outlaws?"

"No, Jack, but I wants revenge."

"You do not wish to avenge poor Ribbons any more than I do; but it would be a bad thing to hang this man."

"That's so, Jack," cried several.

Turning to the prisoner, Texas Jack continued:

"I say, Saunders, if I can get the boys to side with me and spare you, will you tell all we wish to know?"

"Yes, for I hain't no fool."

"Well, boys, set me free, and we'll hear what he has to say, for I know that you'll side with me, and not with Trailer Tom."

"We'll do it, Jack, and woe be unto him if he slips up on the truth," said one of the scouts, and he set Texas Jack free.

"Now, Saunders, tell your story, and if it is not true, and we'll soon know, then the boys will hang you and I'll not raise a finger to protect you."

"What does you wish to know?"

"Where is Silk Lasso Sam?"

"In hiding."

"Where?"

"At Paint Branch, in a cave there in the cliffs."

"And his men?"

"They are there with him."

"How many of them?"

"Four."

"Who are they?"

"Cast Iron Bill, Ugly Dan, Wild West Will, and Card Sharp Dave."

"Where is this cave?"

"There is some bushes grows right whar I was when Doctor Powell captured me, and behind them is ther cave."

"And the outlaw chief is there with his men?"

"He is."

"Five in all?"

"Yes."

"You can guide us there when Chief Cody comes back?"

"Yes."

"Then you have saved your neck by your confession," said Texas Jack.

CHAPTER LX.

THE OUTLAW'S REVENGE.

THERE was something in the confession of Grip Saunders which Texas Jack did not

like, and that was the expression on the man's face.

He was neither very glad that he had escaped by betraying his comrades, or he had some underhand game to play through his confession.

It was not very long after when Surgeon Powell and the chief of scouts returned.

They were at once told what had been done, and the result.

"You played your cards well, Jack, and I guess he told the truth."

"Bring him here and we will have a talk with him and then set out for the Paint Branch Cave," said Buffalo Bill.

The prisoner soon after appeared with Texas Jack who said:

"He knows that I have told you what he confessed to."

"You confessed under fear of death what you would not make known to Surgeon Powell and myself," said Cody.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Them fellers would have hanged me and you wouldn't."

"So we will find Silk Lasso Sam and your pards at the secret cavern near Paint Branch?"

"I don't say so."

"What do you say?"

"I says that is ther retreat, when I left them."

"They were there when you were captured by Surgeon Powell?"

"They was."

"And you?"

"Was on duty as sentinel."

"Why did you not give that letter addressed to Bonnie Belle, to Silk Lasso Sam, and which you got from Four-in-hand Frank's coach?"

"'Cause I hain't seen Silk Lasso Sam since, he havin' come up on ther northern trails, but he was ter hev been back soon after I left thar as prisoner."

"And you think he is there now?"

"He's mighty apt to be."

"Very well, lead us there, and if we find it is the retreat of your comrades, you are to go free, on condition that you leave this frontier at once."

"Oh, I'll go, and don't you forgit it."

The party then mounted, and with the prisoner riding ahead with Buffalo Bill, they set off for the Paint Branch.

It was an hour before sunset when they came within sight of the branch, and Surgeon Powell called a halt.

"Bill, let me speak to you a minute."

"Yes, Doc."

"You go forward with this prisoner and I'll hold the boys here."

"Have him show you just where the cave is, and if there is any treachery, just call, and we will come."

"When you get the bearings bring him back, and I have a scheme to propose to you."

"All right, Frank," answered Cody, and he set off with the prisoner.

"Let me say to you right now, Saunders, if you intend any trickery, you will be the first one to suffer by it."

"I don't mean ter play yer dirt, Buffalo Bill."

"See that you do not."

The prisoner moved on among the rocks until he reached a certain point, when he said:

"Does yer see them bushes ag'in' ther cliff?"

"Yes."

"They hides ther cave."

"Well?"

"It's a tunnel, and goes back some distance to an opening."

"Yes."

"Thar's whar they keep ther horses, and has ther camp."

"No other way to get there?"

"No."

"Or to get out?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Sart'in."

"Then we can go on foot and surprise them?"

"Better ride, for it's uncommon wet traveling."

"And thus let them know we are coming."

"Go on foot if yer likes."

"That is all you have to say?"

"Yas, exceptin' thet I don't want yer ter take me, as ef yer does I'll be ther fust one they'll kill."

"Likely enough."

"Yer kin tie me to a big tree as grows near ther cave, and leave me safe until yer returns ter keep yer word and set me free."

"All right."

"Now return with me to where my men are," and Buffalo Bill went back and told Surgeon Powell all that had been discovered thus far, and told him by the prisoner.

"Bill?"

"Yes, Frank."

"I am going to play fat outlaw, mask and all, and you must play prisoner."

"I don't understand."

"Why I shall rig up in that fellow's clothes and mask, mount his horse, pretend to tie you to your horse, and we will go forward, while we'll bind and gag our man, leave him here, and the scouts can creep near on foot to be within call, for I do not like the look upon that fellow's face, for he means treachery."

"We'll do as you say, Frank," was the ready answer of Buffalo Bill.

The prisoner's face turned red and white rapidly by turns, when he heard the plan, and he struggled to free himself, and would have given a loud yell, had he not been stunned by a blow from Buffalo Bill.

Then he was gagged and securely bound, and one man was left to guard him and the horses, while the others were to follow on foot after the surgeon and the scout when the two had been gone some little while.

"The surgeon, in his disguise, mounted the bay horse of the prisoner, and leading the animal ridden by Buffalo Bill, the two set off together for the cave."

The scout appeared to have his hands bound behind him, and his feet fastened under his horse, but it was not the case, for he could free himself in an instant.

They boldly rode up to the cliff, in which was the cave, and suddenly from the top of a large tree came a voice:

"Is that you, chief?"

Then peered a man out of a large tree, growing close to the cliff, and a limb ran back against the rocks.

"No, I'm Grip Saunders," answered Surgeon Powell, and he added:

"Yer see I has got Buffalo Bill fer a prisoner."

"I does, and we thoughted you hed been kilt," but thar is nobody here now."

"Whar is they?"

"Cast Iron Bill come arter Ugly Dan and Card Sharp Dave, ter go up and help the chief kidnap some prisoners, and I remained ter look arter ther horses and ther camp."

"All right, come and help me with my prisoner, fer I expects ther scouts is on our trail."

"Then we ends them with ther cave-in, as we is sworn ter do, for any one who enters ther secret cave and don't know ther ropes, that ends 'em, yer know."

The Surgeon Scout gave a quick glance at Buffalo Bill, for both saw the fate the prisoner had intended for the scouts, to get his revenge.

CHAPTER LXI

THE FATAL BRIDGE.

IN response to the disguised Surgeon's request to come down and help him with his prisoner, the man disappeared by walking along the limb to the cliff, upon which he leaped.

Then he went up the rocky wall for a short distance and was lost from sight in a crevice.

"What do you think of that, Bill?" asked the Surgeon Scout in a whisper.

"If you had not played outlaw we would have been entrapped by that fellow."

"It is just what he intended to do, and how we must find out, so be ready to capture this one when he joins us."

"I'll be ready."

"It must be Wild West Will, as we have Grip Saunders, and Cast Iron Bill took Card Sharp Dave and Ugly Dan off to join the chief."

"Yes, to aid in kidnapping some one."

"But who?"

"Some one from the fort; but here he comes."

There was heard a rustling sound toward the rocks, the bushes were pushed aside and the outlaw who had been up in the tree appeared.

They saw that he had a handsome face, was tall and slender, and wore no disguise or mask.

"Fetch him along, Grip," he called out.

"Come here, Wild West Will, and help me, for Buffalo Bill hain't no slouch ter handle," said the surgeon.

"All right," and Wild West Will approached the two while he said, without any slang:

"I hate to see you a prisoner, Buffalo Bill, for I have always admired you, and this will be your end, of course, for Silk Lasso Sam shows no mercy, except for gold."

He had approached the two now, and the surgeon had dismounted, and suddenly Buffalo Bill threw himself from his horse directly upon the outlaw.

At the same time the Surgeon Scout clapped a revolver to his head and said:

"You must surrender, Wild West Will, for you have no chance."

"I hav'n't, that's a fact, so I do surrender."

"But what a clever rope in."

"Yes, you were caught in your own trap, or rather Grip Saunders was, for we have him a prisoner a quarter of a mile from here, and these togs and mask I have on, I borrowed from him," Frank Powell said.

"Well, I am caught and I admit it."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Offer you terms."

"What terms?"

"Now you are a good-looking fellow, and not naturally bad I believe, or your face belies you."

"All I ever heard bad of you, though there may be much which I did not hear, was that you allied yourself with such men as Cast Iron Bill, Ugly Dan, Grip Saunders, and Card Sharp Dave to go with Silk Lasso Sam."

"You have fortunately for yourself been found here alone, for you can make terms with us, and we will be generous."

"Well, you put it straight, and I guess if I don't wish to hang I had better strike a trade."

"You will hang most certainly if you do not."

"What is your offer, gentlemen?"

"We made a trade with Grip Saunders, and he brought us here; but from what you remarked about the secrets of the cave, there is no doubt but that he brought us here to send us to our death, for he said that he did not wish to go in, as he would be the first man shot, as a traitor, and we could bind him to a large tree at the mouth of the cave while we went in and attacked his comrades in their camp, which he stated was an open space in the cavern."

"This is what Grip told you, was it?"

"It was."

"Well, let me tell you that he knew that I, or some one else of the gang, was at watch in the tree, and would see all that was going on."

"The moment that you entered the cave I could step back on that cliff and pull a rope."

"That would haul the prop out from under the timber bridge which spans a chasm in the cavern, and every one of you would be dashed to death in a bottomless pit."

"Then I could set him free, with pulleys and ropes we could raise the bridge into place again, and no one would ever know the fate of Buffalo Bill and his scouts, for you must know that no hoof leaves a trail on this soil, and each one of us have mufflers for our horses' hoofs where the land is soft, and hence we have thrown you off our tracks as we have done."

"That was a red-hearted act of Grip Saunders, and one which he would never have gotten me to help him carry out, for I am not such a traitor as that to men who are doing their duty in hunting down just such lawless fellows as we are."

The outlaw had spoken in a manly way, and Surgeon Powell frankly held out his hand to him, while he said:

"I did not believe that you were so bad after all, and here's my hand on it that you

shall go free, and not be known in the matter even to Grip Saunders, if you help us."

"And you have my pledge, too," said Buffalo Bill.

"I'll help you on those terms, and as the chief may be back soon, you had best lose no time about it, for it is nearly dark."

"This has been a retreat of Silk Lasso Sam's for a year, and he has got it fitted up well for concealment and protection, showing wonderful ingenuity in what he has done for his own safety and the destruction of others."

"Come, I'll show you the place, gentlemen, and leave you in possession, and you can send me away under guard, to be set free when you see that I have led you into no trap."

"Come!"

He entered the cavern followed by the surgeon and the scout, and picked up a lantern which he had lighted as he came through.

"See, there is the chasm, and here is the bridge."

"It is all safe, for it would bear a score of horses, yet can be thrown by springing this prop, or trigger beneath it."

"Had half of you gone beyond, you would have been dragged in also, for there are ropes that the bridge would pull across the slope and trip any man and horse when the bridge fell."

"What an ingenious piece of deviltry," said the Surgeon Scout.

"I told you that it was."

"Now we will cross and go back to the opening, which is a basin, and this is the only egress and ingress, except a rope ladder to the top of the cliff."

"In the camp you will find out a secret that will surprise you, and when you understand the place after my explanations, you will find that Silk Lasso Sam and his men will walk into their own trap."

"Then that means my liberty, you said?"

"It does," was the earnest reply of both the surgeon and the scout.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE GAME FOR GOLD.

It was with a very heavy heart that Nina De Sutro rode back to the fort with the "Ancient Sport."

She felt that she was again in the power of the man whom she had most reason to dread, and knew that he traded upon her fears that he would expose the secret of her marriage to him to force her to obey his wishes.

That she held him in her power too was simply to her mind an off-set of her secret, without the power to force him to yield to her demand that he should either leave the fort, and her forever, or be exposed.

She had, therefore, been forced to tacitly consent to his plot, hoping that when his game was played through, his plot accomplished, she would be forever free of him.

So it was that she asked Clarice Carr to accompany her upon her ride one afternoon, following the plot with her outlaw husband.

Clarice had been wishing for an outing, so had gladly consented, and the two had ridden off together.

Not far from the fort they had been joined by the "Ancient Sport," and he had urged to be their escort.

Nina had consented, and so Clarice could not do otherwise, though she did not like the supposed old man.

Away they had gone then together, the escort urging them to go with him to a glen where there was a great quantity of beautiful wild flowers.

It was rather further than they had wished to ride, but "Mr. Mayhew" urged so earnestly that they acquiesced, and rode rapidly to get back to the fort before dark.

The glen was reached and it was seen that their escort had not exaggerated in the least, for there was a wealth of wild flowers.

The two ladies dismounted, their escort led their horses away to make them fast, and the flowers were plucked with many expressions of delight at their beauty.

But suddenly Nina uttered a cry that startled Clarice, as she beheld Mr. Mayhew struggling in the grasp of two men, who had suddenly sprung upon him.

At the same moment a man sprung toward them, and grasped each by the arm.

"Hold on, my beauties, for you are my game," he cried.

Resistance was useless, for Mr. Mayhew had been overpowered, and was seen to have been manacled, and the two men came rapidly to the aid of the one who had made the two ladies captive.

Both Clarice and Nina always carried a weapon, when riding, but they were in their saddle-holsters.

"Young ladies, I mean you no harm, nor any to that old gentleman, if you will accompany me quietly."

"I want money, big money, and I can get it through ransoming you, for I know, Miss Carr, that you are a very rich woman; Miss De Sutro is also, and I take it the old cove there has plenty of gold at his command."

"I must take you all to my retreat, and just as soon as I can do so with safety, I'll open negotiations for your ransom and restoration to your friends."

"Are you Silk Lasso Sam?" asked Clarice, coldly, for the man was masked.

"I am not, but I am a man just as much in earnest in what I say as he ever was."

"We can but submit, only do not bind us."

"You must be tied to your saddles, for you are both dangerous, as I know."

Their horses were brought up, and they both mounted.

Then a lariat was passed around their waists and under their horses, so as to secure them from slipping from their saddles on the way, when darkness came on.

The Ancient Sport was also told to mount, and he too was tied in his saddle, and his hands being manacled, escape for him seemed impossible.

The outlaws then mounted their horses, and one leading, the other two following the prisoners, they started upon their way.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Clarice, as the sun drew near the horizon.

"To my retreat."

"Is it far from here?"

"Yes, for we will not reach there before dawn."

"You are not Silk Lasso Sam?"

"I am not."

"So I see now."

"How?"

"You have a brand upon your hand which he did not have."

"Curses upon that hand, and the man who put it there!" came with savage earnestness from the outlaw's lips.

"Ah! it is B. B.; that must have been put there by Buffalo Bill, as his brand," continued Clarice.

The man gritted his teeth but made no reply, and soon after Clarice asked:

"When do you intend to restore us to our friends?"

"When your ransom is paid."

"How are you going to get it?"

"I will find a way."

"May I suggest a plan?"

"What is it?"

"As we are more likely to be ransomed out, being women, than a man would be, suppose you send this old gentleman back to the fort with your terms, appointing a place to meet him, and, when you receive your money, giving us back into his keeping?"

"Yes, and have him bring Captain Dick Caruth and his troopers to pounce upon me and capture me and my money?"

"No, I would not do that, if I vowed not to do so," said the pretended old man.

"What ransom do you intend to ask for us?" persisted Clarice.

"I shall put the figure high for you, twenty thousand dollars, for you are worth it, Miss Carr."

"That is high, and a sum not readily obtainable here; but large as it is I would rather pay it than remain a moment longer than necessary in your hateful keeping; but would you not accept that sum for all?"

"Oh, no!"

"Why not?"

"Well, I want ten thousand for the old man, and ten thousand for you, Miss De Sutro, and I know that I can get it."

"I doubt it for one, unless my good friend Colonel De Sutro will honor my order for it," said Mayhew.

"You will have to pay it or die, that is all there is about it."

"Outlaw business is playing out on this frontier, and we have got to strike for big money and get away before our necks are stretched."

"I want just what I say, and not one of you go free until I get my money in hand paid."

"And how will you get it?"

"I will have to let the old man go back, as you suggested, Miss Carr, and get it."

"When he does get it, he can go in Horseshoe Ned's coach on its eastward run, and I'll meet him somewhere on the trail and have you not far away to give into his charge when I get the money."

"That is the game I play and no other."

"And when will he go back to the fort, for our friends will be anxious about us?" asked Clarice.

"He can start back now, for nobody can follow our trail once night comes on, for we know how to hide it," was the outlaw's response.

CHAPTER LXIII.

DASHING DICK TAKES THE TRAIL

CAPTAIN DICK CARUTH was fond of long horseback rides alone.

Especially was this the case when he had any work to perform, and upon the evening when Clarice Carr and Nina De Sutro went out on a ride he felt that he had work to do, and set about its accomplishment in a very systematic manner.

The truth was that Captain Dick Caruth did not like the Ancient Sport.

He had played with him and caught him cheating, he felt sure.

He had seen him on several occasions when he did not move like a man with the weight of his years.

Again he had observed him take too many horseback rides alone.

He said nothing to any one about suspecting the old man, for the two whom he would have consulted, both Frank Powell and Buffalo Bill, were absent.

But he decided to watch the old man.

On the day in question, when the Ancient Sport had joined Clarice and Nina in their ride, Dick Caruth had observed him, from a distance with his glass, meet three horsemen and hold a conversation with them.

He had seen him meet a horseman twice before, and say nothing about it upon his return to the fort.

So he decided to follow these horsemen.

He did so, at a distance, not wishing to have them see him, and after a dozen miles they had halted in a glen.

Captain Caruth took up a position a long way off, upon a hill, and watched through his glass.

He saw them go into ambush as it were.

Soon after up came three others on horseback, and the horsemen had disappeared.

These were the Ancient Sport and the two ladies.

Captain Dick Caruth regretted that he was not half a mile nearer to the scene, for he soon saw that his services were needed.

He saw, in fact, the capture of the party from the fort.

To dash out then and attempt a rescue would have been madness, and so he felt that all he could do would be to bide his time and follow.

This he decided to do, for he could keep in sight and thus track them to their den.

He had now come to the conclusion that the old man was a fraud, a scamp playing a kidnapping game.

So he quietly took up the trail and followed, as he was determined to go to the end of it.

"If I only had Frank Powell and Buffalo Bill with me, or half-a-dozen of my own gallant troopers," he said over and over again.

But wishing did no good and he stuck to his trailing, and a good trailer he was.

As it grew toward sunset he suddenly drew his horse back behind a rock, for he saw that the party ahead had halted.

After a short halt one of them came riding back upon the trail, while the captors with their captives went on at a more rapid pace.

It was the one who was coming back who interested the captain now.

It was the old man, he saw.

The captain always carried a lariat, and he knew well how to use it.

He now got it ready for use, and then drew his revolver and held it in his left hand, ready.

Soon the old man came within range and the lariat was thrown.

As it left his hand the captain threw himself from his saddle and ran forward.

He was just in time to clap his revolver upon the old man as he fell to the ground, for the lariat had dragged him from his saddle, the captain's well-trained horse having stood firm as a rock.

In the fall the gray wig had come off with the hat, and when the captain had torn off the gold spectacles he said:

"Well, Silk Lasso Sam, we meet again."

"Who calls me Silk Lasso Sam?" and the man groaned as though in anguish.

"Come, you are not hurt, and can play no tricks on me."

"See, this hump is a false one, and—take that!"

The outlaw had been groaning in apparent anguish, but had suddenly made a spring at his captor, to receive a blow from the revolver of the captain full in the face.

Before he could rally from its stunning effects, he was bound securely by the captain, who said:

"This time, Silk Lasso Sam, there will be no escape for you."

"Come, you are to mount your horse and go with me, and I'll pick up that trail to-morrow at daylight, for I'll be on the spot ready, and without you to guide them your men will soon be run down."

He had now bound his prisoner beyond all chance of escape, and catching his horse led him up.

"You must mount, Silk Lasso Sam."

"I will not."

"Then I will see how much torture you will stand," and the captain drew his knife.

"Do not do that; I will mount."

And he did.

Then he was secured to his saddle, and the captain was about to start for the fort when suddenly he saw a party of horsemen approaching.

"Ah! they are the fort cowboys."

"Now I can send you on with them, and word too for my troop to follow, while I go on and keep up with the captors of those young ladies."

"You have made a misdeal this time, Silk Lasso Sam."

"Those cowboys will hang me, if you give me over to their keeping."

"It is just what I hope they will do," was the vehement response.

The cowboys, a score in number, now came up, having just been relieved from duty at one of the Government cattle-ranges and were on their way to the fort.

They saluted the captain politely and looked with wonder at his prisoner.

"Cowboy Charlie, this man is none other than Silk Lasso Sam!"

"Hang him!" came in a roar from the cowboys.

"I have been upon his track, and saw him meet his men back in the glen, and capture Miss Carr and Miss De Sutro."

"He turned back for some reason, and I captured him."

"You are to take him to the fort, if you can resist the temptation to hang him, while I go on after those captors of the ladies."

"I will keep in sight of them, mark the trail, and do you, Cowboy Charlie, ask Colonel Dunwoody to send my troop after me with all haste."

"Send them directly to this place, and from here on I will tie a bush to the tail of my horse, so that the trail can be followed readily, a part of the way with lanterns."

"Now, Silk Lasso Sam, I leave you in safe hands," and the captain dashed away, for now it was about sunset.

CHAPTER LXIV.

INTO THE TRAP.

It was Cast Iron Bill who had charge of the captives, and Silk Lasso Sam had left him with every hope that his well-schemed plot was going to pan out just as he had planned it should.

He had told Cast Iron Bill to hide the trail

by muffling the horses' feet, and not to push too fast for the ladies' comfort.

"Give them three halts at least during the night, for no pursuit can start until after dawn, as I will pretend to be too fatigued to know anything."

"Go to the secret cavern at Paint Branch, and as soon as I get the money I will take the coach of Horseshoe Ned, change to that of Four-in-hand Frank, get out near Paint Branch, and come on to the retreat."

"We can then make our start, leaving the two girls to wait until dawn, when they can follow the stage trail into Pocket City, for my prisoner I shall put to death."

"I understand, chief," said Cast Iron Bill, who had been apart with the pretended old man, as he had said he wished to give him some instructions out of hearing of the two ladies.

Then had Silk Lasso Sam started back upon the trail to fall into the dangerous hands of Captain Dick Caruth, while Cast Iron Bill, aided by Ugly Dan and Card Sharp Dave, had continued on with the captives.

In the mountains matters at the secret cave were not exactly as Cast Iron Bill and his pards expected to find them, nor as Silk Lasso Sam believed they would be.

Wild West Will had made a clean breast of the whole affair, and told that Silk Lasso Sam had not left the frontier at all, as he had promised his sister, and had been the one who had robbed her.

He had arranged a disguise, and had gone upon the different trails, and then had, through Cast Iron Bill, the others join him.

All of them had been disguised and masked alike, and mounted upon blood-bay horses, so as to appear like one and the same road-agent.

Wild West Will also told the Surgeon Scout and Buffalo Bill that the chief had gone to the fort in disguise to kidnap Miss Carr, and had taken Cast Iron Bill with him.

The latter had returned for help, and Ugly Dan and Card Sharp Dave had gone with him, and they were expected back soon with their captive.

"We are in just the right place," said Buffalo Bill, and the Surgeon Scout agreed with him.

But they were still more of that opinion when in the camp of the outlaws they found a prisoner there in irons.

He was wan and wretched, for the cruel chief was slowly starving him to death.

In fact he would have been still more emaciated except that Wild West Will had been secretly giving him food and water, and had told him he would help him escape when the opportunity offered.

And that prisoner was none other than Deadshot Dean the miner.

The meeting between the poor man and his rescuers was an affecting one, and he frankly said that Wild West Will was the cause of his being then alive, as he had given him a little food and water each day.

The miner told how he had been entrapped in his cabin, and brought blindfolded and bound to that retreat, the chief telling him that he had never forgiven him for marrying the woman he had loved, pretty Kathleen Clyde, and intended to have his revenge by starving him to death.

That he was carrying out this threat was proven by the appearance of the prisoner.

But food and water, administered sparingly by Surgeon Powell, had begun to show good effects, and the prisoner was carried by the scouts to the distant camp where Grip Saunders was held a prisoner, and there made comfortable.

In the camp, hidden away, were stationed a dozen scouts, under Buffalo Bill, and the others were to remain outside and follow the outlaws on into the cavern when they arrived.

Surgeon Powell was drilled by Wild West Will, who took his position upon the cliff with him, to play the part of Grip Saunders, and hail the outlaws, when they came from the secret, natural sentinel-box in the hollow tree.

Thus was all arranged at the retreat for the return of Silk Lasso Sam and his men, with their captive, for it was supposed that only Clarice Carr was to be taken prisoner by the outlaw chief.

It was the third morning of their stay

there, soon after sunrise, when Surgeon Powell gave the signal that the outlaws were approaching.

They came up from Paint Branch, over a rocky road that left no trail, and the hoofs of all the horses were muffled, besides.

First came Cast Iron Bill, masked, and following was Clarice Carr, with Nina De Sutro riding close at the heels of her horse.

The two ladies appeared to have felt the fatigue of their long ride, since a little after noon the day before, when they left the fort.

Behind the captives, or rather captive, for it is known to the reader that Nina De Sutro was a willing one, rode Ugly Dan and Card Sharp Dave, also disguised and masked.

"The chief is not there," whispered Wild West Will from his place of concealment to Surgeon Powell, who was in the tree.

Then the surgeon hailed and Cast Iron Bill called back:

"O. K., pard, we has got here with ther gals, and all as hungry as wolves."

"Where is the chief?"

"He's back arranging ransoms, and we will be rich men all of us before the week is out," and dismounting Cast Iron Bill led the way into the cavern.

The others followed slowly, and then Wild West Will said:

"Now, sir, come and you can see the fun in the camps."

They ran to the cliffs and Surgeon Powell looked over to find Cast Iron Bill in the grasp of Buffalo Bill and the other two outlaws in the clutches of the scouts.

"Now, Surgeon Powell, I have done my duty, kept my pledge to you and to Buffalo Bill, and I will go my way, with your permission."

"One minute, for those men have money about them I know, as Grip Saunders had and you shall have it."

"You can also take your choice of the band's horses, and we will fit you out for your journey, and I hope you will go far from here and lead a different life."

"I will, sir, so help me Heaven."

And an hour after Wild West Will, mounted upon a good horse, and with plenty of money in his belt, was on his way out of that part of the country, if not to lead a new life, which it is to be hoped however that he did.

CONCLUSION.

THE surprise and joy of Clarice Carr cannot be told, at finding Buffalo Bill and his scouts in the den of the outlaws to receive them.

What Nina De Sutro felt at heart I leave to the reader to imagine.

Explanations soon followed, and when Clarice Carr told how the Ancient Sport had been captured with them, and had been allowed to go back to get their ransom money, Buffalo Bill asked:

"And where is Silk Lasso Sam?"

"We have not seen him, sir."

"Did he not capture you?"

"No, it was the man the others call Cast Iron Bill."

"This is strange," said the scout, and after a talk with the surgeon they went to question Cast Iron Bill."

That worthy and his two comrades were too anxious to have their chief remain unknown, that he might aid them in their escape, to betray him, and so they denied all knowledge of Silk Lasso Sam.

What had become of Wild West Will and Grip Saunders they did not know.

But the latter was soon brought to where they were, and they feared that the end of their band had come.

As the ladies needed rest, Surgeon Powell suggested that they go with him to The Frying Pan at Pocket City, there to remain until Captain Caruth could come after them as an escort to the fort, and that Buffalo Bill should go on with his prisoners and report what had occurred at the fort.

This had just been decided upon when up dashed Captain Dick Caruth and his men.

The gallant captain had tracked the outlaws through the night, marked his trail well, and from a distance in the morning seen them enter the canyon.

Then he had gone back to hurry on his troop, who he knew had not spared horseflesh.

They had been soon found, their horses in a

foam, and the lieutenant reported that they had followed the trail with lanterns.

The captain received a joyous welcome, and he it was that made known that their captor was Silk Lasso Sam.

The surprise was great to all, but Nina De Sutro seemed the most affected by it.

When the first shock was over Captain Caruth continued:

"I sent the man on to the fort under the charge of Cowboy Charlie, but Lieutenant Loudon now reports to me that the cowboys reported that the prisoner attempted to make his escape, and so was shot, though it is the general belief that he met his death at the end of a lariat."

"Be jabbers, that's jist afther being the case, capt'in, beggin' yer pardon, sur, for I was afther hearing one of the cowboys say that they had hanged him as dacint as any man could expect."

"Thank God!" broke from the lips of Nina De Sutro, and she reeled and would have fallen had not Captain Caruth caught her in his arms.

It was still decided to give the ladies a rest at Pocket City, so thither went the troop to escort them, while Buffalo Bill started for the fort with his prisoners.

On the way Deadshot Dean stopped at his cabin for he was recuperating rapidly, and when the party arrived at Pocket City Judge King was wild with delight, and gave the ladies Bonnie Belle's rooms.

After a day and night's rest the start was made for the fort and the welcome of the captives upon their arrival is beyond description.

But soon after reaching home Nina De Sutro received two visitors.

They were Captain Caruth and Surgeon Powell, and the former said:

"Miss De Sutro, Doctor Powell found in the secret cavern the private papers of Silk Lasso Sam."

"These papers gave the story of his life, and told that he was your husband, and, from all I saw, I believe you were in league with him here, though from fear, not willingness to do wrong."

"Whatever your motive, let me say to you that we, Surgeon Powell and myself, expect you to take leave of this fort forever, just as soon as you can do so and cast no suspicion upon yourself."

"Do you appreciate the situation, Mrs. Arden Leigh, enough to take our advice and thus avoid all publicity?"

"I do."

"I shall go from here very soon."

"My life was a wreck not from intention of my own, and now I can only hide myself within the walls of a convent."

"When you ask about me in the future, gentlemen, you will learn that I have taken the veil."

"I thank you for the mercy shown me, and bid you a last farewell."

They left her with deepest sympathy in their hearts for the poor woman, and I may say here, long after they did hear that she had shielded her life in the walls of a convent in Mexico, her native land.

That same night Captain Caruth made another visit.

It was to Clarice Carr.

What he said to her reopens the first chapters of this story, for he told her that he had just learned, through letters from his attorney in the East, that Miss Clarice Carr, at Pioneer Post, was the lady to whom he had been married when she was a girl just verging into her teens, and he a West Point cadet, through the action of their respective grandparents.

He told her that his father had sought him out at West Point upon his graduation day, and dying years after, had left him a large fortune.

And Clarice had her story to tell, when he told her how dear she had been to him, and yet how, never knowing what had become of his girl wife, he dared not tell her so.

Clarice told him that her father had been sentenced unjustly to prison for another's crime.

That she had gone to him, cheered his latter years, taken his name, and from the father of the man who had ruined the life of her poor father, she had become the heiress she was.

She told him more.

That though she had changed her name, and he did not know her, that she had known him all the while as her husband, and had sought to win his love first, fearing if he knew her as his forced wife, he might hate her.

She had learned to love him with all her heart and soul, and she was therefore most happy in feeling that she had won his love.

Then the captain suggested that they should keep their romance a secret, and soon after be married by the chaplain of the fort, and to this Clarice Carr consented.

Why Nina De Sutro left the fort was not known, except to Captain Caruth, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, for the scout was let into the secret, and her being the ally of Silk Lasso Sam was never suspected by the outside world.

As for that outlaw chief, whose life had been one of such strange mystery and crime, the cowboys' word was taken for it that he had "escaped," said escape being generally set down by knowing ones as death at the end of the lariat.

Colonel Dunwoody wrote a long letter to Ruth Leigh telling her that at last the end of her brother's career had come, and asking her, if months later when he had a leave, he might come to see her.

The answer came, to come.

When Clarice Carr and Captain Caruth were married and started East upon their bridal tour, Colonel Dunwoody accompanied them, on his leave.

There was one other on the coach going East, and that was Deadshot Dean, who had indeed struck it rich in his mine, and was going back to his loved ones.

In fact Deadshot Dean acted as guide to Colonel Dunwoody and took him with him to Eden Valley, and when six months later the general, for he had been promoted, returned to Pioneer Post, he was accompanied by his beautiful bride, Ruth, once known as Bonnie Belle, the Idol of Yellow Dust Valley.

Of the other characters of my story, I need say nothing of Buffalo Bill and Dr. Frank Powell, so known to the public to-day, while Texas Jack and Four-in-hand Frank have gone on their last trail into the Great Beyond.

THE END.

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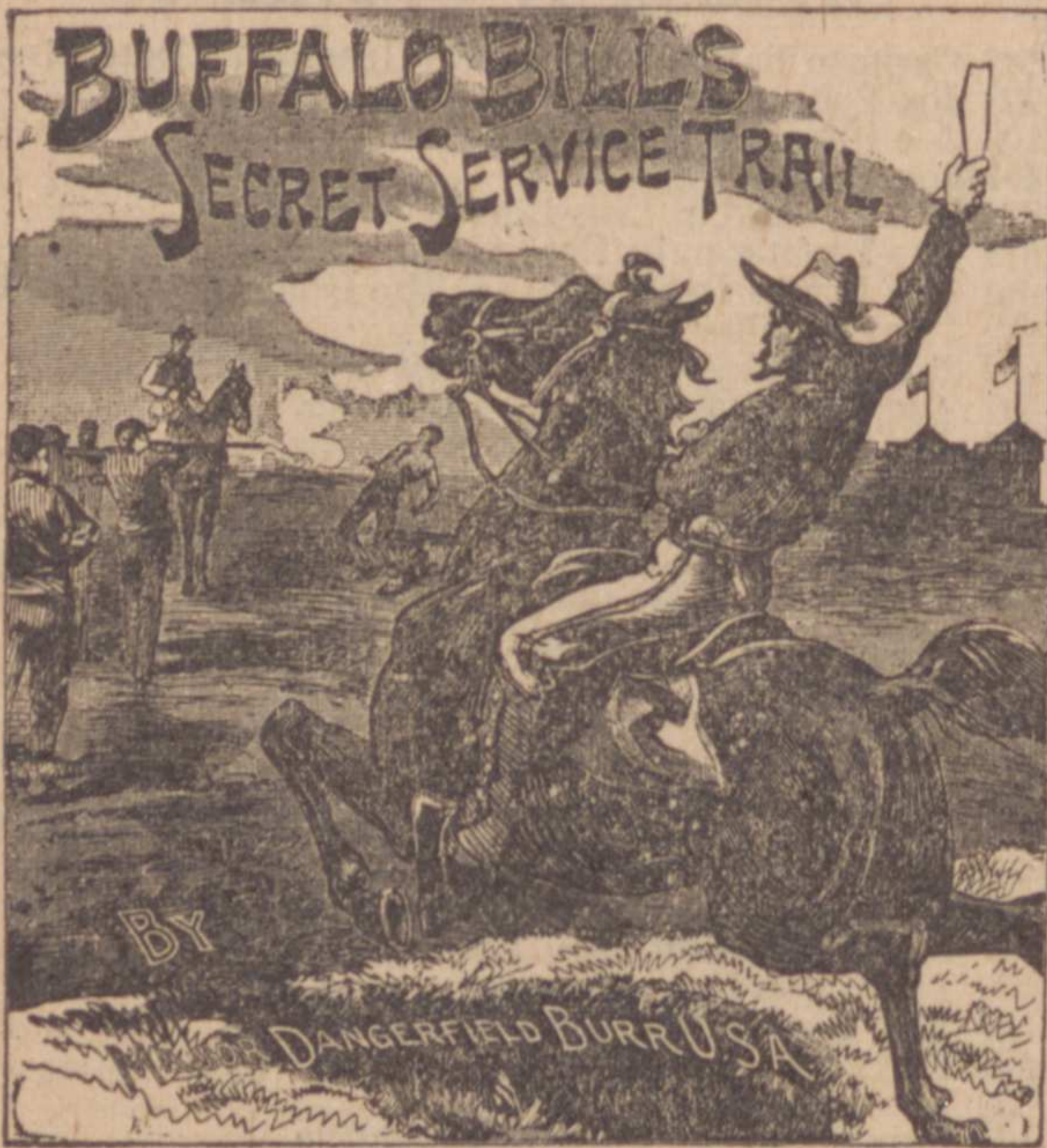
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